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Foreign currency: Travels inside Zimbabwe's economic crisis

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Foreign currency: Travels inside Zimbabwe's economic crisis

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing and Environment)

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CHAPTER 1. BETWEEN BORDERS

On a tarred road lined with chain link and concertina wire, I traveled the no man's land between South Africa and Zimbabwe's border posts. From the back of a Greyhound bus, I watched a grey dawn break, relishing how the new light gave the dried savannah slowly back its color and shape. The low edges of the horizon brightened and the pale silhouettes of thin-armed acacia trees emerged, gaunt and graceful, from darkness. The muted yellows, dusty reds, and the thick grey-green tangle of scrub brush all rose from the blank slate of night, and returned to me a place I had not been in six years.

I had boarded the bus last night in Johannesburg hours after sunset and traveled the 350 miles north to the Zimbabwe border entirely in darkness. Through the dim bus windows, I'd been unable to see anything besides vague shapes—blurry borders between road and bush, sky and earth, the dark outline of a tree here, the rise of mountains in the distance like a shadow. Now, the slowly brightening dawn gave fullness and nuance back to a place I thought I had burned so clearly in my memory during the years I'd lived there. I had remembered the sun-faded colors, remembered the tall stalks of elephant grass and the flat crowns of acacia trees, but had forgotten the quiet, empty feel of the African bush, the way a bird cry rings through dry air like a gunshot. Though I'd tried not to, I'd remembered the place frozen, a series of still shots looping the last six years, one-dimensional as a well-worked memory. I had forgotten that movement and life was what made the Southern African savannah dazzling—the stir of breeze, the shift of light, the constant change of perspective.

I was headed toward the Zimbabwe border in October 2007, returning to Zimbabwe at the height of its economic crisis. I knew that even though the Zimbabwe I was approaching looked much like the one I'd known six years ago, it was in fact, a new country, one I had never known. News stories and correspondence over the last six years with friends that still lived there confirmed that the country was no longer the same place I had left in 2001. Inflation and food shortages, and the movement of nearly the entire economy to the black market had changed how even the city streets looked, they'd said. *In town the sidewalks are crowded now with vendors*, they'd told me, *you can hardly move*. Even the people were different, they'd said—always buying and selling things, running here and there, trying to make ends that shrunk daily from inflation meet. Yet, that morning, in the fog-smoked light at the Southernmost edge of Zimbabwe, it was nearly impossible to see the changes I'd heard so much about. Women walked slowly and steadily at the sides of the road, the bright purples and greens of their skirts and head wraps blooming brightly in the dim early morning, their heads held straight and graceful. Out here in the borderlands, barbed wire fence to either side, I was so close to being back, so agonizingly close, but I still had one more border to pass through.

A flat brick building the same dusty red as the dry earth came into view and the bus driver announced over the intercom that we would now proceed to the Zimbabwe border post.

“Please have all of your paperwork ready,” he said, his voice crackling in the speakers lining the overhead compartment.

“After we have passed immigration,” he continued, “We will all return to the bus for the customs check. Please return immediately to the bus after immigration for the customs check.”

I felt like I was on an amusement park ride and this small man in the blue shirt who'd driven us silently through the night was suddenly a boisterous tour guide, like he might call out over the crackling intercom, *“On your left and right you will see the entirety of road, some two kilometers, lined with chain link and wrapped from top to bottom with coils of the finest grade razor wire. And now, to our right, you'll find the historic Beitbridge Duty Free building. Currently empty, except for a few bottles of Mukuyu wine, the shop used to be a popular last stop for travelers looking to purchase Irish Whisky and American cigarettes.”*

I waited for the driver to repeat the border crossing instructions in Shona or Ndebele, hoping to hear Zimbabwe's two main languages again to see how much I remembered, but he hung up the microphone and stared straight ahead, driving steadily. Out the window, the Zimbabwean flag flew above the brick one-story border post building, snapping green, red, and yellow against the grey morning. We drove past the line of cars waiting with their engines off for the drive-thru immigration and pulled into a parking lot full of semis, white mini-bus taxis, and cars loaded to their ceilings with baggage. He killed the engine and the other passengers collected their hand luggage and began to file out. I watched them enter the glass door of the faded brick building, but hung back inside the bus to go through my paperwork again.

Though it had been six years since my last visit, before that I'd been to Zimbabwe nearly every year for four years. I'd first traveled there in 1998 as a 20 year-old undergrad student anxious to make my one chance at a study abroad program count. Growing up, my family hadn't traveled much except for visits to my two grandmothers in Southern Illinois and upstate New York. Besides that, at 20, the only other places I'd been outside my home in the suburbs of Chicago were a few school trips to Canada and some vacations I had piggybacked on with friends' families. At that time, I felt my chances to see the world were limited and wanted to use the study abroad program to go somewhere I felt I would not be able to go on my own. London and France didn't draw me. How hard was it to save up a few thousand dollars and buy a Eurorail pass? But Africa, that needed expertise.

I knew next to nothing about the continent at that point and didn't really care which country in Africa I went to. I had the idea, though I doubt I could have articulated it at the time, that going anywhere in Africa would teach me all I ever needed to know about how to travel. The logic was, if I could survive Africa, the world was mine. Any place after that would be a cinch. My school offered two programs to Africa, one to Senegal, and the other to Zimbabwe. Since I didn't speak French, the decision was easy and with twenty other undergrads, I spent six months in Zimbabwe taking classes, living with a Shona family in Harare, traveling to Victoria Falls, the Great Zimbabwe ruins of the Monomotapa Empire, and to small villages in the highlands of Eastern Zimbabwe. Contrary to plan though, when the six months were up, the world was not mine. I was Zimbabwe's.

I found I loved the warm, dry climate of the Mashonaland plateau where Harare, the capital city, was located. It was the most temperate place I'd ever lived. I loved the sun-filtered light beneath the thin jacaranda limb canopies that lined the streets in the city center. I loved the huge, orange flame tree blossoms, the long, arched stems of calla lilies growing in gardens, and the wild, sprawling pink and orange bougainvillea vines that spread themselves so completely over their host trees that for months I didn't know there was even another tree beneath them. I loved the smallness of the place, how after a few weeks I started seeing people I knew in town, and when I saw them, they stopped to talk, asked after the health of my family—distant parents they'd never meet. I loved all the walking I did between buses and buildings and the freshness of the food we ate—the cooking greens cut each night from the backyard garden, and the guavas, bananas, sweet potatoes, and ground corn meal all grown within the country. But most of all, as a writer, I loved the lyricism Zimbabweans gave ordinary speech. The Shona language was rich with metaphor and proverbs and it spilled over into their use of English. Often people responded to simple questions about their day or their health with answers like: 'a barking dog is not dangerous' or 'he who is drenched no longer dreads walking through dew.' They told stories full of vivid characters and weren't afraid to act out scenarios from their tales. And like good poems, their words played over and over in my mind, turning up new meanings weeks later and inspiring me with the malleability of language.

When I left after that first six month trip, I did not know how strong a hold the place had taken on me. But back at home for my senior year, while my classmates applied to grad

schools and jobs, I realized the only thing I really wanted to do was return to Zimbabwe. I felt I wasn't finished there, that I hadn't learned everything I needed to know. Instead of taking the GRE or polishing my resume, I applied for every program and grant I could find that would get me back to Zimbabwe. I was lucky enough to receive a Fulbright fellowship and spent the entirety of 2000 there learning to play the *mbira*, an indigenous 24-keyed Shona thumb piano that made an achingly beautiful, haunting metallic sound. I took mbira lessons, went to concerts and mbira ceremonies, attended classes at the Zimbabwe College of Music, and watched the country begin to decline. Shortly after I arrived in January 2000, the country ran out of foreign currency and fuel and violence started in the countryside as white-owned land was seized by the government and redistributed to indigenous Zimbabweans. Inflation crept steadily up, food production and industry slowed due to the political instability, and by the time I left in January 2001, those who could were leaving Zimbabwe in droves. When I returned for my last visit in August 2001, high inflation and an overvalued currency had made exchanging money in banks out of the question. Within just a year, Zimbabwe had become a cash only, black market economy and I was forced to bring all the money for the trip in cash, exchanging twenty dollar increments in the back room of an Indian-run shop.

From my seat in the back of the bus, I thought again of the bus driver's words. *After we pass immigration. . . .* He made it all sound so easy—like you simply moved from one line to another at an amusement park—first you wait for the rollercoaster, then queue for cotton candy. Maybe for the majority of passengers it was that easy. Earlier that morning at

the South African border, most people from my bus had flashed their green Zimbabwean passports to the agents and crossed through, released. Returning home was easy, you were guaranteed entry, but getting into another country, even in the best of circumstances, was always uncertain. For the Zimbabweans on the bus with me, the migration north toward home was simple compared to the challenge of moving south, but for me, the uncertainty was just beginning.

That pre-dawn morning at the South African border, as I waited for my passport to be stamped for exit, the lobby on the other side of the building was packed end to end with the anxious faces of Zimbabweans trying to gain entry into South Africa. At 5 a.m., the line snaked out the door and into a parking lot. From their wool stocking caps and blankets, it was clear those at the front of the line had slept there overnight. Since the economic crisis started in the early 2000s, the number of migrants from Zimbabwe had swelled, and South Africa responded by tightening its borders and visa requirements. Zimbabweans were often denied South African entrance visas on the grounds that they were a flight risk and those who knew they couldn't meet the visa requirements came across the border through the bush in droves, slipping through holes in barbed wire and across alligator infested rivers at night. Yet, the mood on the exit side of the building was relaxed. The South African government was all too glad to see Zimbabweans leave. But for me, the anxiety was just starting. Once I left South Africa, my immigration status became tentative. I was released from one country, but had yet to gain access to another.

During the early 2000s, at the height of Zimbabwe's controversial fast track land redistribution program, the country tightened its borders. The government had grown tired of foreigners, especially journalists, coming in and airing the country's dirty laundry in the international press. Having acquired, often after violent clashes, some 4,300 white commercial farms in a matter of a few years, the government was sick of seeing pictures of beaten and bloody white farmers broadcast to the world. They were tired too of horrific tales from tortured opposition party members and reports of unpaid government employees and fuel shortages leaking out. By 2003, after years of repeated beatings and arrests, the deportation of the American Andrew Meldrum marked the end of foreign journalists in Zimbabwe. I'd briefly rented a cottage from Meldrum and his Zimbabwean wife in early 2000, and had watched from the US horrified as images of his abduction and deportation played on the news. Since Meldrum's removal, no other journalists were allowed in the country. Instead, most major news agencies like *BBC* and the *New York Times* had been sending in undercover journalists disguised as tourists to cover the news of Zimbabwe's declining economy. This technique only made the Zimbabwe government more suspicious of its foreign visitors.

In the dim light of the Greyhound bus, I went through my paperwork again. I had a letter from the English department where I was working on a master's of fine arts in creative writing stating that I would volunteer at Kufunda Village, a nonprofit organization outside Harare as part of the field research requirement for my degree. I also had an ink-smudged invitation letter from my Zimbabwean friend Francis in Harare saying, in overly formal

Queen's English, that he had the pleasure to cordially invite me to visit him and his family and that he would serve as my guardian while in Zimbabwe. I had another letter, one I hoped would be my ace in the hole should I need it, from a prominent American pan-African activist who had visited Zimbabwe several years ago as President Mugabe's personal guest. I hoped these letters would be enough to impress the immigration officials if need be, or at the very least, make them feel I was a fairly harmless student coming to do some volunteer work. With a hard knot of dread in my stomach, I left the bus and walked toward the corrugated zinc roof building where the whim of whichever counselor I got would decide my fate.

Inside, the immigration office was like a rundown bank lobby. The low drop ceiling hung over the room like heavy, old curtains, stifling the light. Behind the counter, the immigration officials stood like bored tellers, staring between patrons out into the world beyond the office, staring past the piles of visa forms stacked like deposit slips along the long wooden counters that lined the windows. The teak wood countertops were nicked and worn and tiles were missing from the intricate square patterns of the wood parquet floor. A few people from the bus stood in the rope-guided line, waiting for one of the two clerks at the counter to stamp their passports. I watched them hand their green passport books sheathed in plastic protective covers to the clerk, exchange a few words in Shona, and disappear through a hallway that lead to Zimbabwe.

I'm in Zimbabwe now, I thought, trying to make the full weight of it register. The border station office was Zimbabwe. It smelled like every Zimbabwean office I'd ever been in—a mixture of dark wood that's been palmed too much, the flat, floral scent of the laundry

bars used to scrub clothes by hand, and Tanganda tea leaves. The familiar cadence of Shona, a tonal language, rose and fell, blending with the hollow *thunk* of loose parquet tiles rattling in their sockets whenever anyone walked. After six years of following the bumps and jerks of the country's political and economic situation from afar, and of hearing how the inflation and shortages were affecting the lives of my friends there, I simply pulled open the door to the immigration office and stepped into Zimbabwe again. I breathed in and took one of the green visa forms for visitors from a pile.

There were no pens in the lobby, so I dug one out the black bag strung across my chest and began filling the form out on the wooden counter. The green visa paper was thin and I could see the wood pulp grains inside it. I wrote carefully, fearful of tearing the paper. *Length of stay: two months*; for address during stay I put the address of the hostel in Harare where I had made a one-week booking. *Reason for visit: tourism*. When I wrote this I felt the hot glare of a lie like a spotlight. Surely the border agents would see through this—who would go there as a tourist now, with food and fuel shortages and the worst inflation of any country in the world?

Zimbabwe had once had a thriving tourism industry with visitors coming from all over the world to see the game parks, Victoria Falls, and to enjoy the temperate climate and upscale hotels and restaurants. But in 2007, the idea of being a tourist there was ludicrous. A cursory search of travel sites before I'd left had shown that international tourism to Zimbabwe, besides quick forays travelers made across the Zambian or Botswanan border to see the Zimbabwean side of Victoria Falls, was effectively dead. Travelers were advised to

bring all the fuel and food they expected to need while there. Because of all these warnings about shortages of even basic foods like bread, rice, and milk, I'd flown first into South Africa to stock up on food in Johannesburg rather than going straight to Harare. In the bus, waiting to go through customs, I had a duffel bag packed with South African rice, cereal, peanut butter, cooking oil, salt, cans of beans and vegetables, and a few chocolate bars to dole out slowly as treats. Everything I'd read about the food shortages never said exactly what wasn't there, only that shelves were often bare, so I'd tried to cover all the bases.

An hour before we'd gotten to the South African border last night, we'd stopped in the South African town, Limpopo. The bus driver had announced over the intercom, waking every one up in the dark of night, that Limpopo would be our last stop before entering Zimbabwe. We filed groggily out of the bus and into the gas station parking lot.

Remembering the shortages on the other side of the border, I'd felt a wave of panic run through me. I'd moved quickly toward the gas station shop and entered the women's bathroom, squinting my eyes at the fluorescent light. I'd tried to fully appreciate the thick rolls of double-ply toilet paper, the spotlessly clean stalls, the freely flushing toilets, and the paper towels to dry my hands. I knew that this would be the most luxurious bathroom I would experience for the next few months, so I wound several lengths of soft, white toilet paper around my fingers like yarn and stuck it inside my bag for future use across the border.

In the gas station store, people I recognized from the bus were buying six or more loaves of bread each, the brown crusted loaves gathered in their arms as they aggressively scanned the shelves of the shop. They were buying ten and twenty pound bags of rice and

maize meal, gold-foil wrapped rectangles of margarine, plastic baggies of fresh milk, and two-liter bottles of fruit squash. On the shelves there were white, bare gaps where products used to be. I wondered if this was because the morning restock hadn't happened yet, or if there was simply a lack of supplies to put there. The white spaces conjured up images I'd seen online of Zimbabwe's nearly bare grocery store shelves. The pictures had all been blurry, taken quickly on cell phones by undercover journalists, but there in the shop at the northern edge of South Africa, the white gaps between products were hard and firm.

As I'd prepared for my return trip, I'd asked my Zimbabwean friend of nine years and former mbira teacher, Peter, for advice on safety and the shortages. In an email he'd told me that he thought it would be safe for me to visit Zim, and about the food shortages he'd said causally, 'If we don't have bread, we just substitute with sweet potatoes.' His words both comforted and terrified me. They spoke of lack, of absence, and at the same time they spoke of survival, of ways to make do. His words confirmed that the Zimbabwe I was headed to in 2007 was no longer the same country I'd left six years ago in 2001.

In the gas station shop that night, I'd gone over my list of basic needs as though preparing for a camping trip. Had I forgotten something? I'd scanned the shelves of the shop, fighting the creeping feeling that this Total Petroport gas station in Limpopo was the last outpost before heading into some stereotype of 'darkest Africa.' I fought the urge to frantically load up with loaves of bread, candy bars, potato chips, razor blades, anything I could find, and cart it all with me to my seat in the back of the bus. Every news story I'd read about Zimbabwe over the past six years spoke only of Zimbabwe's crumbling economy, the

eroding infrastructure and repressive policies of Mugabe's government. The format was usually the same: the brave journalist/adventurer descends from a 'civilized' location into the crumbling world of Zimbabwe and exposes the horrors he or she sees there. Though, I believed what was written about the suffering of the people there, I couldn't believe it encompassed the whole experience of life within the country. There was something too simple, and smelled too strongly of sensationalism in these Zimbabwean horror stories.

People live there, I reminded myself. My friends live there.

When I'd decided to return to Zimbabwe in 2007, one of the primary reasons was my desire to see the life that existed beyond these 'downward spiral narratives' that had become the standard formula for writing about Zimbabwe. The situation was surely more complex than words like 'chaos' and 'collapse'—that were in the headlines of every article on Zimbabwe since early 2000— could ever convey. I wanted to see for myself how people were getting by in an economy that was at 15,000 percent inflation and climbing because they *were* getting by somehow. My friend Francis had hinted that the shift to a black market economy had opened a lot of opportunity for people willing to source items like flour, batteries, gasoline, sugar, and other hard to find products from neighboring countries and resell them in Zimbabwe for a profit. The movement to a black market economy also meant that many people in Zimbabwe were also making substantial profits from buying and selling foreign currency since the country's high inflation made keeping savings in Zimbabwe dollars impossible.

“In every crisis,” Francis had said, “There are winners and losers.”

He worked at a building society bank and handled firsthand the money for both the winners, those whose accounts were swelling from the new businesses the shortages had opened up, and he also saw the effect the economy had on the losers, those whose accounts shrunk each month as inflation decimated their savings. Yet, in the international news all we saw were the losers, those familiar images of subsistence farmers in the African countryside struggling to feed their children, and those living in squalid urban shacks. I knew these images were only part of the reality of Zimbabwe’s economic crisis, and I was returning, in part, to see who the winners were.

The sun was up fully in the immigration office and the light came in dimly through the scuffed lobby windows, shining in yellowed rays that danced with specks of dust. I had forgotten how quickly the sun rose and set this close to the equator and how, during the times I’d lived there, watching these fast shifts between day and night had served as a reminder to me of my own need for adaptability. A flash of pink appeared on the horizon, or a long slant of light fell with the dip of the sun and suddenly day and night traded places. How quickly power and fortune shifts. How quickly the country and the landscape changes. Ten years earlier, Zimbabwe had been the ‘good’ kind of African country, the kind American colleges sent their students to, but three years later, by the time I’d finished my Fulbright year, even Peace Corps had stopped placing volunteers there.

Looking at the green visa form in the Zimbabwe immigration lobby that morning, I was afraid I'd be laughed out of the country simply for checking the tourist box. *Touring what*, I thought, *the ruins?* But if I wasn't a tourist, what was I? I wasn't a journalist or a business person hoping to capitalize on the crisis, nor was I there for any real humanitarian work. The only box I could have checked truthfully would have been 'witness'—something between a tourist and business person, but of course there was no box for this.

Holding my completed visa form, I got in the short queue behind a middle-aged Zimbabwean woman in a grey fleece tracksuit. She handed her green passport to the clerk, a woman with straightened hair pulled back into a short ponytail. The clerk wore the same blue-black sweater with a Zimbabwean flag embroidered in the corner that all the office workers wore. She stamped the woman's passport twice quickly and the *thunk, thunk* of the stamper, echoed off the wooden counter. I watched the interaction between them, trying to judge which of the two clerks available, the male or the female one, might be most sympathetic, or at the very least most apathetic to me. It was a toss up. They were both equally business-oriented, exchanged no jokes or pleasantries with the patrons besides the necessary questions and did not smile as they rolled their stamper over the ink pad and pressed it with the full weight of their authority onto the forms.

In just a few minutes, I would go before one of these clerks and they would either deny me or allow me in. I looked down at the green form in my hand, gazing at the *Reason for visit* section again. The purpose of my return visit to Zimbabwe in 2007 was hard to explain both to my Zimbabwean friends and to my friends and family in the US. Existing for

the last six years in economic crisis, Zimbabweans found it hard to understand why I would pay thousands of dollars for the trip if I was not going to use the visit to directly forward my career or business.

I could hear them shaking their heads even in the emails they sent. “We are trying to get there,” one friend had said about the US, “Why do you want to come here?”

I knew such whim was not a luxury many could afford even in the US, let alone Zimbabwe. My Zimbabwean friends often thought I was being secretive about my reasons or plans for coming in order to exclude them from moneymaking opportunities, and they kept asking the same question from different angles.

“What about sculptures?” one had asked. “Maybe you will sell some Shona stone sculptures when you return home?”

Two weeks before I left, when I had finally worked up the nerve to tell my father that I was returning to Zimbabwe, the first thing he said was, “What in the hell would you want to do that for?”

It was a warm early October day in the small Iowa university town where I lived. I walked my bike home from the university holding the cell phone bunched to my ear with my shoulder. Knowing the news would not be well received, I had put off telling him until the last possible moment. I winced as I tried to explain to him why it was important for me to return to Zimbabwe.

“I want to see for myself how people are coping with such high levels of inflation,” I told him.

I needed to go there during the crisis in order to see it all firsthand. And the time was right for me personally. My job as an editor at the university had just ended and I had a six month gap before I started classes. When else was I going to have that kind of time again? Yet, the answers all hung hollow in the warm fall air.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on there,” he had said. “That country is in utter chaos. It’s beyond third world. It was going to hell when you left there. I thought you’d have been glad you got the hell out of there in time.”

He was referring to when I left in 2001 after living there during the first year of the fast track land redistribution program. While I was gone, he’d followed the stories of the evicted white farmers on the news and worried that my own skin color would make me a target too. No matter how often I’d reassured him in emails, he wasn’t there to see me as I walked safely down the sunlit streets of Harare. I walked my bike off the path to a picnic table by a creek and sat down. The maple leaves were starting to turn bright red at their edges. In Zimbabwe, I knew it the seasons were shifting from a long, dry spring into the rainy summer. I was hoping to make it back there in time to catch the end of the jacaranda bloom. I watched the Iowa creek racing fast with brown flood water and imagined the jacaranda-lined streets of downtown Harare lit up with purple blossoms.

My father was a business man, he looked at the world in terms of risks and gains. What was in it for me, he'd asked in different ways, just as my Zimbabwean friends had. From his vantage point, the risks were too high.

"That country's lawless," he'd said. "Those people are so poor they'll kill you in the street for a few American dollars." I knew this wasn't true, but I was the one leaving, so it was my job to listen.

"You can't save those people," he'd continued.

I nodded into the phone. I wasn't going there to save anyone, that much I knew. Small black picnic bugs landed on my bare arms and bit me. I brushed them off and said, 'I know,' and 'I won't' into the phone.

At the end of the conversation my dad said, "Well, if it's worth it to you. . . It wouldn't be worth it to me."

Bewildered acceptance—that was the most I could ask for really, even from myself. In two weeks I'd be back in Zimbabwe and maybe once there I would understand more about why I needed to return. I walked my bike the few blocks back to my apartment with leaves crunching under my bike wheels. Though I knew my father's response was motivated by his fear for my safety, I couldn't help feeling deflated. We were very different people, but he was a smart man and I knew we both sensed that my answers didn't fully explain my need to return. Was I just another third world junky, dissatisfied with my comfortable life in the West? Or worse, was I some kind of ambulance chaser, running after tragedy to make myself

feel better about my own failings? Besides, what did it matter if someone like me, a thirty-year old American with no real activist interests, bore witness to the living conditions in Zimbabwe? What difference could I really affect there?

In front of me, the woman in the track suit folded her passport back into her purse. She walked away from the immigration clerk and down the long hallway that led to Zimbabwe, her sandals padding the length of the parquet floor. I could hear the slap of the soles long after she'd disappeared. There was no one else in front of me. I swallowed and prepared my speech. I was a student coming to volunteer at Kufunda Village as part of my master's degree field research. I was there to visit friends. I had the letters to prove it. Saying these things to myself, I heard my father's question, '*Why the hell would you want to do that?*,' echoing like footfalls in my head.

Most of the other passengers from the bus had already cleared immigration by the time I approached the long counter, and behind me the lobby was entirely empty. The male clerk closed up his station and went to an office in the back. It was now between me and the woman in the Zimbabwean flag sweater. A numbness associated with inevitability set in. Either I would get in or I wouldn't, I thought. That was the only thing that would happen. I had done all I could do, and would accept any outcome. This same strange numbness had come over me during most major events in my life. There was a feeling of larger forces at play, a feeling that things were shifting beneath me, that the outcome had moved beyond my control, though it had not happened yet. The numb feeling was part of what sociologists

called the liminal stage—the transitional phase between life changing events. The word, ‘liminal,’ which I’d always loved, came from the latin word ‘*limen*,’ meaning threshold.

I go numb at the threshold, I thought. I put things into action. I plan and plan and then, stunned, I leap and something else takes over.

Standing in the Zimbabwe immigration lobby I was, as Van Gennep said, ‘Betwixt and between.’ I had left an old life, an old me behind, but I had not yet entered the place where the new parts of me were waiting. In August, two months before coming back to Zimbabwe, I had moved in for the first time with a boyfriend. We had arranged the small apartment carefully, mixing my things and his, keeping the best furniture and dishes from both our collections and discarding the doubles. Surely, even as we had set up our new home I knew returning to Zimbabwe would change me. But at that time, I had no idea how and still believed even as I stood a few feet from the entering Zimbabwe that I would return to Iowa after a few months and simply take up my old life as a graduate student with my partner with little disruption. Perhaps we would even get married in the next year or so, I’d thought. Buy a house, have real jobs, sleep peacefully side by side in a double bed the rest of our lives. From that perspective, I saw this return trip to Zimbabwe as one of my last adventures, at least for a while. When I got back home to Iowa, it would be time to buckle down and take up the role of ‘real’ adult. I was thirty after all.

I approached the female clerk at her station on the far right of the long counter and handed her my passport and visa coolly, trying with that one gesture to convey the exact

balance between authority and cooperation. She barely glanced up at my face. She looked my passport over, flipped to an empty page, and scanned the pulpy green visa form.

When she finally looked up at me, her eyes were impatient and did not blink. Her short eyelashes curled delicately around her lids and I remembered the tenor of this stare. It was the gatekeeper look, the one given in Zimbabwe by boutique sales attendants and government officials alike. The look said, “Your very existence is an inconvenience.”

With her unblinking eyes still locked on mine, the immigration clerk asked, “Which currency will you pay in?” She annunciated each vowel with equal and full weight.

I breathed in sharply, feeling the wind being knocked out of me from behind.

“What?” I asked. “What currency?”

My brows knit together and I felt my eyes squint, as though I would somehow be able to see her meaning better that way. I repeated her words back to her. *What currency, I thought, for what?*

“Which currency will you pay in?” she asked again slower, irritated. My existence now was truly an inconvenience.

I had been waiting to be drilled about where exactly I would visit and how long I would stay. I had an Excel spreadsheet of my itinerary in my bag ready to show her. It was all I could do not to get it out. I wanted to show her these things, wanted to defend myself against suspicion. I wanted it somehow to be harder.

I had had harder times trying to *leave* Zimbabwe. One time I didn't have the money for a departure tax and another time, in 2001, when I left Zimbabwe for the last time, the clerk at the airport exit station insisted I pay a hundred US dollar fine in cash before being able to leave. He'd narrowed his eyes, aware my flight was leaving in just a few minutes, and struck.

"You have overstayed," he'd said and pointed to the expiration date on my visa.

He knew there was no other flight for days. Then I saw his trick. The date was written in the British manner with the day before the month and he hoped, in my panic, I would forget and just pay.

In that yellowed sunlit border post office at the edge of South Africa, the immigration clerk seemed too tired for such games.

"I will pay in U.S. dollars," I told her.

"Ok," she said, "Thirty dollars."

I dug quickly into my bag before she changed her mind. Thirty dollars, it seemed like a bargain.

Inside the bag, my hand searched over the cloth fabric folds for the thin white bank envelopes that contained all the money I had for the next two months. Because of the high inflation and the government's refusal to devalue its currency, using banks or ATMs to exchange foreign currency into Zimbabwe dollars was equivalent to throwing your money in

the garbage. On the black market, I could get ten times what the banks would give me. Because of this I had to bring all the money I would need in cash and would exchange it little by little on the black market. I had a thousand US dollars in small bills—tens, fives, and twenties and two slim fifties in thin envelopes sealed with mucilage. I had even brought some one dollar bills just in case the inflation was so bad that changing a dollar at a time was necessary.

I pulled out one twenty and one ten dollar bill and set them on the counter. The green money, with its big president's heads and eyeball pyramids, already seemed exotic to me. She stuck the visa sticker onto the blank page in my passport.

Stay, I thought, watching her run her thumb along the length of the visa sticker to secure it in place. With a final thud, she stamped the visa in my passport with the date and border station, October 22, 2007, Beitbridge, Zimbabwe, and waved me on.

I stood off to the side of the counter, stunned, and tried to recompose myself by slowly looking through all the papers in my bag that I hadn't needed—four letters of support and an Excel spreadsheet itinerary. Since I'd booked the ticket a few months ago, I'd been imagining the confrontation over and over, hearing the clerk point out some minor technicality in my paperwork which just happened to make it impossible for me to enter. I'd imagined myself preparing my arguments and carefully weighing my tone, not too indignant too fast. And then the moment would come when the clerk would say, as other immigration clerks in Zimbabwe had said to me, "We'd really like to be able to help you." At that

moment, I'd have to decide what my cut off limit for bribes was. At home in Iowa, rehearsing this scene, I'd told myself one hundred dollars was my limit. I wouldn't pay any more than that. And then I'd imagined myself slipping the two thin fifties out of their bank envelope and discreetly sliding them to the official.

I closed my bag and shook my head, trying to clear all the ridiculous thoughts out of my mind. I was in. After all that planning and worrying, I was in. It was that easy. I'd leapt and now I had landed, but landed on what I was quite sure yet.

The clerk glanced at me with her gatekeeper eyes.

"Go over there," she said, pointing to the adjoining room, "for customs now."

I was like a slow child she wanted to be rid of. In the empty lobby she pointed to another counter where one customs agent, a young woman with long straightened hair styled into spiral curls at the ends, stood.

Maybe this is where they'll get me, I thought. An American coming by bus, surely her bags were full of laptop computers and digital cameras. Surely they will want to assert some authority over me, just to flex their muscles. Before coming, my friend Francis, who was usually all tact and indirect suggestions, had warned me directly not to bring any material of 'political' content with me. His warning solidified all my border crossing fears. I left any books that might have 'political' content at home and changed the word 'Zimbabwe' to 'Botswana' on all my computer files. But I knew if a government agent wanted to give me a hard time, they could always find something. I imagined the customs agents pulling my bags

into a back room and opening them both up, pouring my clothes and South African purchased groceries onto a table and rifling through them, finding some customs law I had broken either by being overweight or carrying some forbidden item.

At the customs counter, the woman with the curls asked if the bags I had in the bus contained any items not for my personal use.

“I have a few small gifts,” I said.

“Nothing for resale?”

“No.”

“Thank you,” she said and waved me on.

After six years of daydreaming about when, where, and how I would finally come back—that was it. I didn’t even fill out a customs form. Beneath my feet, the loose parquet tiles *thunked* as I walked the long hallway out to the parking lot. I pushed the glass door open and stepped into Zimbabwe, dazed by the blinding brightness of day, dazed by the gulf between my expectations and the reality of my entry.

CHAPTER 2. ON CONTESTED LAND

There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

—Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

Groups of young men in baggy, American, hip-hop style jeans and oversized sports jerseys paced the edge of the border post parking lot, running their hands over thick, rubber-banded stacks of Zim dollars.

“Zim dollar! U.S.! Rand! Pula!” they called to the newly arrived. They flicked the tips of their thumbs across the thick stacks, fanning the bills out for display.

“Zim dollar!”

“U.S.!”

“Rand!”

“Pula!” they shouted, alternating between nasal and bass intonations, advertising the currencies they had for exchange.

Whenever someone in the parking lot looked their way, the young men rushed toward them in groups, jostling for business, trying to outdo one another by offering better rates.

“Zim dollar! U.S.! Rand! Pula!” they called, announcing their illegal money changing service in front of the uniformed policemen guarding the border post buildings with machine guns. The guards didn’t give them a second look.

For the first time in six years, I stood on Zimbabwean soil again. The sun shone fully over the crowded border station, and gave me my first long, clear, day lit view of the land. Beyond the razor wire fence that surrounded the station, the dried yellow grassland stretched as far as I could see, and its emptiness sent a twinge of sorrow through me. I hated the nowhere feeling of borders posts, hated the neither here nor there state.

There was no place to rest my eyes. Everywhere I looked the parking lot rippled with movement. Lines of cars, white mini-bus vans, and semi-trailers jockeyed for position, honking their horns and blasting *kwaito* and *kwasa kwasa* music, their speakers shaking. Men walked around hawking everything from Dairibord ice cream to rat poison and women sat at stands selling bananas, mangoes, apples, single foil wrapped candies and cigarettes. Travelers hoping to enter South Africa and those returning to Zimbabwe came on foot, carrying duffel bags and backpacks.

There was a sadness to the border post, a feeling of desperation mixed with nowhere-ness, but I also felt a hot jolt of joy. I was in. I had a six-month visitor’s visa in my passport, and was now only a six hour bus ride from Harare. I drank in the calls of ‘Zim dollar! US! Rand! Pula!’ from the forex dealers, soaked up the sight of women bouncing babies rhythmically on their backs to comfort them and of men reclined on their elbows on

the grass, at ease in their bodies in ways no American ever is. For the last six years during dull moments at my computer desk or lying in bed trying to fall asleep, I'd imagined myself returning. I'd seen myself slapping hands with my friend and mbira teacher, Peter, and imagined the two of us sitting for hours talking about our own lives and the political problems in Zimbabwe and the U.S. like we had during our lessons. At night, in the cold Iowa winters, I'd seen myself walking with no real destination down the sun lit streets of Harare.

How strange the mixture of joy and sorrow that welled in me as I stood breathing in diesel fumes from the busses and semis that clambered past, gears grinding. I recognized the sadness as grief. I had left something behind. Something was lost. After all these years, I was back in Zimbabwe, but I had not yet arrived at the place I had called home. Perhaps I was mistaken, maybe Harare had never really been my home. Or maybe I'd stayed away too long, and too much had happened in my absence to ever bridge.

I walked away from the bus and scanned the border post. The long, low horizon was dotted with dried tufts of yellowed elephant grass, patches of exposed light red earth, and deep green, brambling thorn bushes. The horizon stretched indefinitely in all directions, meeting the low morning sky and was broken only by the small, one-story government buildings and the sheath of border post fence coiled with razor wire. From the tops of the corrugated iron roof buildings, the Zimbabwean flag snapped red, green, and yellow in the sage-scented morning wind.

On the bus, the mood was lighter. We'd passed the difficult part of going through immigration, now the rest of the trip was just a matter of time until we reached Harare. The driver switched on a Shona gospel cd and a smooth male tenor sung "*Jesu zvakanaka. Fambana Jesu mumoyo*" over loud keyboards and synthesized drums. We pulled away, leaving behind the crowds of people, the overloaded mini-bus taxis, and the small, squat border post buildings. The other passengers stretched out in the seats emptied by those who'd gotten off before we'd crossed the border in Limpopo. They chatted with one another and shared fruit and drinks from their coolers.

Outside, I watched long trains of mostly young men walk on the side of the road in groups heading south toward the border post. The road was a tight two-lane, still lined on either side with a 12-foot border fence crowned with broad coils of razor wire. The stream of people and the metal fence lattice scrolled by unbroken until we crossed the Limpopo River at the Beit Bridge a few miles north of the border station. The river Rudyard Kipling once called "great grey, green, and greasy" was wide and shallow at the tail end of the dry season, more of a sandy river bank cut with the slivers of streams than a river. Lush marsh grasses grew in dense patches along the banks and glowed green with life in the otherwise red-dust tinted landscape of Southern Zimbabwe.

Over the bus PA speakers, the backing choir of the gospel band repeated "*Fambana Jesu mumoyo*" in a call and response with the leader singer. Digging into my dormant

Shona, I roughly translated it as traveling with Jesus in your heart. I leaned back in my seat and smiled, remembering how even nonreligious Zimbabweans played gospel music when traveling, just in case. I wondered about the train of people headed on foot to the border. Were they traveling with Jesus in their heart? Would Jesus help them cross through safely, find work, and feed their families?

At the end of the bridge, the border fence and its coiled razor wire finally stopped and to either side of us lay the open, arid savannah, sun-baked to pale green, yellow, and dusty red brown. From every angle, I could see only Zimbabwe. I felt a rush of excitement, maybe similar to what some of those Zimbabweans walking toward the border post would feel as they crossed into South Africa and left the shadow of that long border fence behind in search of a better livelihood. More likely though, both the legal and undocumented Zimbabwean migrants felt their entrance into South Africa as bittersweet. Home was home and all the Zimbabweans I knew abroad missed home fiercely, living in the West or neighboring Southern African countries more as economic exiles than willing inhabitants. At times, I envied the clear sense of home their exile gave them, often feeling unsure myself where my own home lay. Since living in Zimbabwe, I'd felt torn between the U.S. and Africa, between the safety of the developed world and the deeper intensity of life I felt in developing countries. I was unsure where I should make my life, unable to commit fully to either direction, reluctant to pursue to any career or relationship in the U.S. that might close one option off for me.

From my seat toward the back of the bus, I watched the Matabeleland bush of Southern Zimbabwe slide by and wondered if this return trip to Zimbabwe would answer some of those questions. The dry landscape to the either side of the road was full of scrubby, thin shrubs and spiney, slender acacia trees with names like camel-thorn and hook-thorn. Unlike other trees, the savannah acacias flattened at the top and formed a flat, translucent canopy made of thin, pinnate ruffled leaves that let the African sun fall through and onto the grassland. Having been rooted to one environment, the acacias adapted themselves, evolving the thorns they needed to survive and the thin, flat leaves to live in harmony with the rest of the savannah. Without picking a home, I was free, but stunted, more like the orange and yellow lichen that grew in speckled patches along the granite boulders than the tall, whisp-like acacia trees.

Around ten in the morning, we pulled into a service station outside Masvingo, about halfway to Harare. The traces of Zimbabwe's colonial past showed in the cracked cement picnic benches that still circled the shade trees, where weary white travelers ten, twenty, or more than thirty years ago had unpacked their picnic lunches in the mid-day heat and rested on the long journey of taking children to boarding school or buying supplies in Harare. Bougainvillea vines and frangipani trees grew wild on either side of the service station, let go, and small crowds of people hung around the service station entrance. Groups of young guys talked and laughed and women with baskets of oranges, bananas, small green and orange speckled mangoes, the kind that are sweet and tart, but full of strings that stick between your teeth, sat behind their stands on colorful cloths spread on the ground. Young

men with rubber-banded stacks of Zimbabwe dollars in their hands sat on a curb looking out at the bus as it pulled in, but none got up.

Signs of the new Zimbabwe sat side by side those from the early independence era, the colonial past, and the pre-colonial era before that. Ancient granite boulders sat in a field near empty analog fuel pumps and two men in red and white Total gas station polo shirts and black creased trousers rested on the cement lip of a flower bed. Near the door of the shop, a sign written in white chalk read: *No Fuel*. The letters got larger on the board as they went, with the 'l' of fuel twice the size of the 'n' of no, as though the person writing it had become more excited as he wrote. The service station felt like an excavation of Zimbabwe's history, with the layers of the past exposed like geological ages on rock. I had been to this service station several times before when I'd visited the Great Zimbabwe ruins as an undergraduate and later in 2000 on my year-long fellowship. I knew we were only a few miles from the ruins of the Monomatapa Shona empire and the land this fuelless gas station sat on was most likely part of the outskirts of that ancient kingdom.

Great Zimbabwe, which the country was named for at Independence, was the site of the largest kingdom south of the Sahara Dessert. From the 13th to 15th century the kingdom had been the gold-trading center of Southern Africa as well as an important part of the region's trade in ivory, glass, and copper. Zimbabwe meant 'house of stone' and the Great Zimbabwe ruins were a maze of elaborate stone enclosures and walls of grey granite bricks built stone upon stone nearly forty feet high in places. Built without mortar, the stone enclosures still held together centuries later and spread out over the green countryside for miles. When the whites arrived in the 1800s and found the granite walls and intricately

arranged buildings that revealed a complex hierarchical society with separate dwellings for kings and wives of kings and commoners, they refused to believe Africans could have made such a structure. Instead, they found it easier to believe that Egyptians traveled over 3,000 miles, built it, and left. During Zimbabwe's war for Independence in the 1970s, Great Zimbabwe became a source of pride for those who fought for majority rule in the nation that was then called Rhodesia, symbolizing both the power and skill of their ancestors and at the same time representing the inability of white settlers to accept black Africans as equals.

The economic crisis Zimbabwe faced in 2007 had its roots in the complex history of the land I walked on that afternoon, stretching my legs from the long bus ride on the grounds of a service station that no longer had fuel. Since the 15th century, with the arrival of the Portuguese traders, this area of Africa had been a site of battle, a piece of contested land important to the wealth of those in the region to fight for. First, the Portuguese fought the Shona for control of their trade routes, then with the advance of King Shaka in the 1820s in the area that is now South Africa, the Ndebele tribe pushed further north to avoid slaughter or assimilation into the Zulu tribe. Under the rule of King Mzilikazi, the Ndebele fought the Shona, driving them further north and claimed the Southern region of Zimbabwe as far north as the Great Zimbabwe ruins as part of Mzilikazi's kingdom. In the 1880s, when the white settlers arrived with Cecil John Rhodes's British South Africa Company, they obtained the mining rights for the region from Mzilikazi's successor, King Lobengula, and under the charter Rhodes established with Lobengula and the British government, his company began exporting gold and other precious metals from the region to England. Though Rhodes had

planned a railway system from Capetown to Cairo that would export all the valuable resources in Africa easily to Europe, he felt a particular affinity for the area that is now Zimbabwe was buried there in an area of Matabeleland he called 'The World's View.' In honor of Cecil John Rhodes, the British named what was then a protectorate after him, calling the region Rhodesia in 1895. The land remained under British rule until 1965, when the white settlers of Rhodesia, refusing to comply with the British demand for multi-racial democracy, declared themselves independent from Britain and became the independent nation of Rhodesia. This severance from Britain, referred to as the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), was undertaken by the white-ruled government of Ian Smith.

After UDI, the black nationalist movement of Zimbabwe began a long and bloody bush war from 1965 to 1979, and eventually gained independence as the black-ruled nation of Zimbabwe in 1980. Yet, much of the best farming land in the country remained in the hands of white Zimbabweans twenty years after independence despite Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe's promise at independence to redistribute land taken from blacks during the colonial era back to indigenous Zimbabweans. In 2000, facing the first real political threat to his party since independence from the opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Mugabe's ruling party, ZANU-PF, began a fast-track land redistribution program that seized white-owned commercial farms and redistributed them, often without title deeds, to indigenous Zimbabweans that supported his party. The seizure of land by ZANU-PF was often violent and Zimbabwe's economy faltered.

When I was in Zimbabwe in 2000, the fast track land redistribution program was just beginning and I watched the issue explode within the country. In January 2000, there was

talk of trouble in the rural areas on white farms, quiet stories spreading by word of mouth about white farmers being forced at gunpoint to give portions of their land to rural black Zimbabweans, but in the cosmopolitan capital, Harare, there was no clear evidence. By mid-March, white farmers were coming into the city, beaten and bruised, having been forced to leave their farms and everything they owned by armed gangs of Zimbabweans claiming to be veterans of the war for Independence, though many of the 'war veterans' were hardly old enough to remember the war directly, let alone have fought in it.

The 'war veterans' came to the white-owned farms to claim land that had been promised to them by president Mugabe twenty years ago at Independence in an attempt to even the injustices of colonialism. At Independence in 1980, white farmers, who made up 5 percent of Zimbabwe's population were estimated to own 80 percent of arable land, having relocated Zimbabweans to rocky, mountainous, and arid soil during the hundred plus years of colonialism. By 2000, the numbers had changed little and the few farms that had been redistributed between 1980 and 2000 had mostly gone to high ranking government officials. After twenty years of waiting, the 'war veterans' rose up and began taking by force what no one would give them. Facing serious political competition from the MDC in 2000, Mugabe's party, ZANU-PF, endorsed the land redistribution movement started by the war veterans and sought to win re-election by turning the land issue into a racial issue. ZANU-PF portrayed the MDC as proponents of neocolonialism because of the support MDC received from the largely white Zimbabwe commercial farmers union and the party's backing by Western governments. In an attempt to hide the failings of their 20 years of rule, ZANU-PF used the

redistribution of land to ingratiate themselves with the black majority of the country and demonize the white farmers they had previously supported.

Gruesome pictures of white farmers murdered in their homes and images of ramshackle squatter camps on once-prosperous farms became common front-page news. Most of the white commercial farmers left their land, reluctantly leaving farms their families had owned for generations. They moved into Zimbabwe's cities for safety, or returned to England or South Africa, and many started over at midlife with nothing in Mozambique and Zambia. Those who stayed mostly stopped farming because they couldn't afford to invest in a harvest they would very likely lose. Zimbabwe's economy reeled from the loss of productivity. Between 2000 and 2003, at the height of Zimbabwe's fast track land redistribution, tobacco production, a major export and earner of much needed foreign currency, dropped by 65 percent. At the same time Zimbabwe went from a country with surplus grain to being a million metric tons short of what was needed to feed its people. By 2007, it was estimated that nearly 50 percent of Zimbabwe's population was in need of food aid.

Walking the outskirts of the service station grounds, I took my sweater off and felt the sun warm on my arms and face. My head was dull and dizzy from the night spent turning over and over on the bus seat and my exhaustion gave the new world around me a one dimensional feeling. In the warm, dry air, I walked stretching my legs and thought of tanks I'd seen still sitting rusted on the sides of the road in Mozambique ten years after the conflict was over. I thought of the evidence of struggles I couldn't see on the surface of this land,

hidden like landmines in the memories of the people who lived there and had lived through the war for Independence and were now living through the economic crisis.

We were in Masvingo province, just south of central Zimbabwe and the sweeping flatness of the savannah gave way to the foothills of the Great Dyke mountain ridge, still small and rolling at that point. The landscape was beginning to change. Acacia trees were interspersed more often with msasa trees and other wide, straight-trunked trees like boer bean and wattle with high, full crowns. Here, the trees grew thicker, closer together creating a heavier canopy. Beneath me the soil was more clay-like and a darker, rust-red brown. This was where the real farming part of the country began.

October in Zimbabwe was the tail end of a long spring that bled almost imperceptibly into a six month summer. With the coming of the *bumharutsva*, or ‘the rains that sweep away the ashes’ in September or October, the planting season would begin. The *bumharutsva* rains clear the charred dust from recently burnt fields, and they come fast and hard, so heavy you can’t see in front of you, beating against soil that has been mostly dry since April. The *bumharutsva* rains signaled the beginning of summer and let farmers know was time to prepare their fields for the new growing season. From the dryness of the soil, I could see the *bumharutsva* hadn’t yet come to Masvingo, but maybe they had arrived further north in Mashonaland near Harare.

It is late spring, I thought, but how much of the land available will even be planted this year?

Since the fast track land redistribution began in 2000, in a country of 38 million hectares, some 8 million hectares of formerly white-owned commercial farm land had been

redistributed by 2007. But the largely poor, uneducated Zimbabweans who were given the land were not given the financial assistance, title deeds, or training, they'd been promised during the early days of the fast track land reform. These new land 'owners' had neither the financial ability nor the security of private property rights needed for them to invest in the new land they now 'owned.' By 2007, much of Zimbabwe's formerly productive farmland sat idle, effectively destroying Zimbabwe's economy by killing its once-booming agricultural industry.

I walked back toward the service station, toward a restaurant called Wimpy attached to the store. Wimpy, with its bright red and white logo, was a British fast food chain found all over Southern Africa. As an American I chuckled at the idea of a 'Wimpy' burger with its stark comparison to our aggressive 'Baconator' and 'Big Macs.'

A small truck with a hardcover canopy over the back, the kind people referred to here as a 'bakkie' from the Afrikaans word for truck was parked near the Wimpy entrance. The license plate was yellow and long and thin compared to American plates. I thought it was Zimbabwean, but realized I couldn't remember what Zimbabwean plates even looked like anymore. As I passed the truck, an elderly white couple came out of Wimpy. They were short, both a bit pudgy, with faces the deep red of rosacea and broken blood vessels.

"There is no water," the woman yelled to the man. "What am I supposed to do? They don't even have any goddamned water."

Her voice was high, with the clipped, sharp accent of white Africans.

"How am I supposed to wash my hands without any goddamned water?" she asked.

Her hair was white-yellow and made her face look even redder. I guessed her blood pressure was very high. The two station attendants sitting on the curb looked down at the blacktop and made no movement from their place on the flowerbed ledge.

The man muttered, “This goddamned place—going to shit. Thank god we got fuel in South Africa.”

He shook his head, looked around at the quiet petrol station and got into the bakkie. The woman got in on the passenger’s side, slammed the door, and they drove away.

Why were they so surprised at the lack of fuel and running water? Even I knew not to expect these things. The fuel had dried up at most gas stations while I was in Zimbabwe in 2000 due to the country’s lack of foreign currency to purchase it and hadn’t yet come back except in sporadic shipments and special rations. This was not a new development. As for running water, outside the cities it was not a given. Maybe they’d been gone a very long time, and had only just returned. Or, maybe they lived, like many older white Africans I’d met, in a continued state of denial, constantly shocked and appalled at the changes in their country. I tried to take a lesson in reality from them. How exhausting it would be to be always red in the face, at the end of your rope.

I pushed the glass and metal door open and went inside Wimpy. Daylight came in through the front windows and illuminated the reception desk where the waiters stood in their red and white uniforms, but toward the back of the restaurant, near the kitchen, it was dark. The electricity was off. A woman with shoulder length curls tucked loosely in a baseball cap with the oval Wimpy logo asked me what I’d like. Her facial expressions were flat and

faraway, and I imagined she was thinking to herself, ‘Oh great another irate white lady.’ I smiled trying to show her I was the good kind of white lady, the nice kind.

“May I see a menu?” I asked, the smile still playing in my voice.

The waitress barely looked at me as she pulled a laminated tri-fold menu from a stack on the reception desk and handed it to me. I was starving in that strange, deep gut emptiness that comes with lack of sleep, like my body had used up every morsel in my stomach just to stay awake, but I had no money in local currency, and no access to any except with the money changers that sat outside on the curb of the service station parking lot.

I stared at the menu, stalling for time. The food was listed by name and picture, but there were no prices next to any of the pictures of ice cream sundaes, fries, or Wimpy burgers. Maybe they would take US dollars? I stared at the menu, dazed. There were no prices, no electricity in the restaurant, and with the shortages in Zim, most likely many of the items on the menu weren’t even available. Besides, even if the food was there and they could cook it, I had no money to buy it with. My stomach growled at the thought of a warm meal. Why did getting lunch have to be so hard? Frustrated, I started to feel like the red-faced couple I’d just seen. The woman with the curls in her Wimpy hat looked over at me with growing impatience. A line from Paul Simon ran through my head, “He doesn’t speak the language, he holds no currency; He is a foreign man surrounded by the sound, the sound. . .”

How would they even cook the food, assuming I could order?

“He is a foreign man surrounded by the sound, the sound; Cattle in the marketplace, scatterlings and orphanages; He looks around, around. . .”

I continued to stare at the menu.

“Do you have an egg roll?” a voice from a table by the door asked the waitress and she nodded. I looked in the direction of the voice and saw the older man with the distinguished grey twists in his hair that I’d spoken to during the customs check sitting at a booth near the window with a cup of tea.

He looked at me, and asked, “Would you like a cup of tea too?”

I nodded and thanked him, feeling both guilty and relieved for the help. The waitress took the order and rushed toward the dark kitchen in the back of the restaurant.

“I don’t have any money,” I told him as I sat down at his table. “I mean, I have money, just none changed.”

He shook his head like we shouldn’t even speak of it. I nodded and thanked him again, the phrase *maita basa*, meaning ‘thank you for your work,’ came into my head from a deep pit where my memory of Shona lay, dormant.

“Which country do you come from?” he asked, his voice full of a gentle authority.

“I’m from the United States.”

“Ah, America,” he said, tipping his head back in acknowledgement. This is the word most people want to hear, America, but I always left it out.

“I was in America once some years ago,” he said, “visiting my daughter in Texas.”

I nod, waiting for his verdict. “Did you like it there?”

“It was okay. A bit fast for me. I prefer my home in Zimbabwe.” He tapped his white mug with the red Wimpy logo on the table gently for emphasis.

From the twists of gray mixed in his thick black hair, I guessed him to be in his late fifties. He had high cheekbones, a solid, square jaw, and was probably very handsome as a younger man. His thoughtful, measured way of speaking and the confident manner with which he held himself made me wonder if he had or still held a position of power in Zimbabwe.

“You are traveling to Harare?” he asked.

“Yes,” I told him. Not wanting him to think me a newcomer, I added, “I haven’t been there since 2001.”

“And what do you think of our political situation?” he asked. He watched me closely, knowing he was putting me on the spot.

I was unsure what to say. I’d read that CIO spies for the government were everywhere and was advised in several travel articles not to discuss politics or say anything negative about the government to strangers. I hedged.

“Well, I’ve read a lot in newspapers about the current inflation problem,” I said, trying to read his face as I spoke. It was unreadable. “And also problems with food and water.”

“I think it is so sad,” he said looking out the window at the fruit vendors and money-changers. “That so few leaders in the world speak out against our problems.” His brown eyes went soft and I saw they were ringed at the edges with blue.

“We feel abandoned,” he said with conviction. “We don’t expect the American army to come in and fight a war for us. No, not that. But no one says anything.”

We talked about a few American and European leaders who made speeches at a recent UN conference calling for increased humanitarian assistance to Zimbabwe, but I didn't feel free to say anything that would reveal how I really felt about the government's mismanagement of the economy.

"Speeches," he said. "Speeches and more speeches and then some sanctions. That is all we get."

Sensing my discomfort at the topic, or maybe interpreting my silence as ignorance, he asked if I had accommodation in Harare. His tone changed from conversational to fatherly, making me realize that I must look as tired as I felt.

"A friend is meeting me at the bus station," I said. "Then he will help me get to the lodge I'm staying at."

He nodded. "Have you spoken to him?"

"Well, not recently," I admitted, feeling like I do with my own father as the cracks in what I thought of as an airtight plan began to show. Francis, a friend of mine since 2000, had arranged to meet me at the bus station. In our email exchange, he said he would just walk over from his office downtown. He had always been reliable, a valued trait in Zimbabwe, so I had worried more about getting over the border and hadn't quite gotten to worrying about my arrival in Harare yet.

“Even if my friend’s not there, I can grab a cab to the lodge,” I said. It’s in Avondale, so it’s not far.”

He nodded again. “Why don’t you call your friend to confirm.”

He pulled a silver Nokia from the front pocket of his barn jacket and handed it to me. I showed him the number for Francis in my light blue address book and asked him if he could help me dial it.

“I can’t remember if I need to dial the zero here or the city code.”

He dialed the number and handed the phone back to me. Nothing happened. As I held the phone to my ear, it didn’t make any ringing sounds. Then it went dead. The screen read: “Call ended.” I handed the phone back to him.

“You have to keep trying,” he laughed and shook his head at me. “This is Zimbabwe. The networks are bad.” He handed the phone back across the booth.

I pressed redial several times, but the call kept ending before it even rang. He asked me if I had a landline number, as they were more reliable, and I shook my head.

“I only have this number,” I said, feeling like the least prepared person in the world. After all the months I’d spent planning for this trip and once I was in country, I couldn’t even figure out how to pay for my own food or get in touch with my ride from the bus station.

He took my blue address book and dialed the number again. He kept redialing the number while I sat in the hard plastic chair staring at the empty booths and tables. With my eyes adjusted to the dim interior, I realized we were the only customers in the restaurant.

“Hello. Hello?” he said loudly into the phone. “Hello?” and put it down.

“I got through but it cut,” he said. “You’ll have to try again closer to Harare.” He put the phone away in the inside pocket of his khaki barn jacket.

The waitress brought a tray with a Wimpy logo cup and saucer, a bowl of packaged sugar, a little pitcher of cream, a teapot with hot water, and a teabag and set them on the table without looking at me. Shortly after a plate with a warm croissant roll and a fried egg arrived.

“Thank you again,” I told him as I tucked into my sandwich.

He waved his hand, dismissing my words and I remembered the importance of accepting gifts politely in Zimbabwe. Under no circumstances should you make the giver feel embarrassed.

Though I still have no idea how they prepared it without power, the egg roll was delicious. The bread was fresh, soft and flavorful; the egg a bit too oily but the bread soaked it up nicely.

“Let me give you my number, just in case,” he said as I ate. Opening my address book to the back where I’d listed numbers for friends in Zimbabwe, I handed it to him. In large print, at the top of the page he wrote: Savanhu and his cellphone number, 091, a Harare

number. I felt relieved; if anything went horribly wrong Savanhu would surely have a solution.

“Enjoy your food,” he said and got up. “Best of luck to you in Zimbabwe.”

On his way out the door, he handed the waitress a wad of bills. Sitting alone in the semi-dark restaurant eating my sandwich and drinking tea from a white cup with the red Wimpy logo, I watched the waitress count the stack of bills meticulously; she counted through twice, brow wrinkled, her full attention needed to keep the amount clear.

After eating, I stood outside in the shade of the Wimpy overhang and watched the women at their fruit stands selling huge bunches of bananas, pyramid piles of oranges, and single cigarettes and foil-wrapped sweets. The women sat on squares of brightly printed cloth and talked to one another in the slow, relaxed way people in the country do here—with long gaps between exchanges, then sudden bursts of excitement, and then again a slow back and forth. I was dying to eat a Zimbabwean banana. I remembered them sweet and creamy, nothing like the dry, oversized ones I bought in the supermarkets at home, but I still had no money. I paced the shade of the awning, waiting for the bus to load up to leave, feeling that if I sat down, I might fall asleep.

When we left the service station and headed north toward Harare, I scanned the countryside that went by for signs of the changes wrought by the land redistribution program, but I had nothing inside me to compare it to. Though I knew I’d traveled this part of the Harare-Masvingo road before, my memory of how the rural savannah landscape had looked

six years ago had faded in the same way my recollection of Iowa farms was already blurring. After less than a week away, the Midwestern landscape I'd lived in for eight years was losing specifics and eroding into stereotyped compressions of endless rows of late fall corn and white two-story farmhouses. I found it impossible to hold the image of two landscapes in my mind at one time. The dry, tall elephant grass and red tips of the budding msasa trees made it hard to see the oak tree forests I'd walked in my whole life. How could I ever be able to know this land closely enough to read its history with my own eyes? But still, I noticed the hobbled trunks of trees cut into jagged stumps from axes. There were places where a straight row of jagged stumps divided the land from the road. Maybe this used to be a windbreak for a commercial farm? I wondered at what kind of violence now unseeable to the outsider that might have taken place there as farms were redistributed.

The bus driver changed the gospel cd in mid-song. The strum of acoustic guitar came over the speakers and then Kenny Rogers was singing, "On a warm summer's evening on a train bound for nowhere, I met up with the gambler; we were both too tired for sleep. . ."

I laughed out loud at the juxtaposition of cultures—"The Gambler" on a bus in the Zimbabwean countryside, matted, dusty-haired donkeys grazing on the sides of the road. I thought of the gamble the colonizers had taken in trying to control by force a people whose connection to this land went back to the time of the Monomatapa, a people who outnumbered them 6,000 to one. I was sure Kenny Rogers never had this context in mind as wrote the song.

As the bus moved north along Masvingo Road, the landscape turned from rolling savannah foothills to spectacular views of stacked granite outcrops. We were at the base of the Great Dyke mountain range that cuts a north-south swatch of granite hill through central Zimbabwe. Outside, granite boulders balanced large on top on top of small at impossible angles on the tops of the hill peaks. These odd rock formations, called the balancing rocks, were scattered throughout the Zimbabwean countryside, made by millions of years of wind and rain erosion. Sometimes large flat boulders balanced off the tip of a small round stone at such precarious angles it was hard to believe nature could form anything so fragile. It appeared the slightest breeze could send them tumbling, yet they had held themselves stable for millennium.

Watching the dark blue shadow of mountains graying in the distance contrasted with the balancing rock peaks bathed completely in the bright sunlight of day, I was overcome with a feeling that this land was holy, wise and full of a depth of history not fully knowable within our historical system. The weight of the sky's solid ultramarine floor dropped so close to us, I felt I could stand in the middle of the road we were traveling on, outstretch my hand from my five foot two body, and touch the first layer of heaven. No wonder this land has been so violently contested over the centuries, no wonder people have been willing to die to hold onto it. Under the low carpet of blue sky and the bright shine of sun, I thought of the millions of years the sun had lit the blue sky over this land. Although I knew all was not well in Zimbabwe, out there on Masvingo Road with steep mountaintops made of mounds of boulders to my left and right, I felt all my own difficult history and Zimbabwe's recent struggles slide into a long, expansive perspective, from human to geological time. Zimbabwe

was here for the long haul, the land and the people would continue regardless of political leader or false boundaries, a few centuries of madness was just a blip in the lives of these tall rocks. As for me, the age and height of the mountains and the grace with which the balancing rocks held dwarfed me and I was happily returned to being one small blade of yellow elephant grass at the base of a single mountain peak.

We passed another stretch of land surrounded with red and pale orange bougainvillea vine. The flowers wrapped themselves around the trunks of a straight row of windbreak trees and climbed up, cascading their blooms from the tops of the trees. The leftovers of another white farm. Over the PA speakers, Kenny Rogers sang: *“Every gambler knows that the secret to surviving, Is knowing what to throw away and knowing what to keep. Because every hand’s a winner and every hand’s a loser . . . ,You got to know when to hold `em, know when to fold `em, Know when to walk away and know when to run . . .”* I thought of the white farmers and wondered when and how they each made the decision to cut their losses and leave. I thought of the black farmers pushed to the edges of tribal trust lands during the colonial era and wondered when and how they each made the decision that they were tired of waiting on broken promises.

As the bus chugged north toward Harare, I watched for the battle scars of the land issue, but through the eyes of a foreigner looking out a bus window onto one of Zimbabwe’s main roads, there wasn’t much I could see. The rural savannah landscape became a blur of acacia trees and yellowed grasses. Periodically I saw the neat, straight lines of jagged stumps,

the trees long since axed for firewood, that might have been a windbreak for a former commercial farm. We passed dust roads leading off the main highway that were lined with jacaranda trees just beginning to bloom pale purple blossoms. Staring down one of the straight red-earth roads with a row of more than a hundred, tall, gnarled jacarandas on either side, I wondered if that road used to lead to the big house of a white-owned commercial farm. White farmers always cultivated hedges of bright pink bougainvillea vine and other brightly colored flowering trees. A flash of red from a uniform line of flamboyant trees or the gnarled canopy of straightly planted jacaranda trees down a country lane revealed the hand of the most likely long gone white steward. Seeing the jacarandas still in bloom this far south from Harare, I felt confident that I would find the city streets still lined with purple blooms when I arrived later that afternoon.

From a high stretch of road, I was finally able to see a rural farm complex in a valley. The huts were round with thatched elephant grass roofs and were clustered together—kitchen, bedroom, storage, and sometimes the square cement latrine off a bit in the distance. Huge, rib-thin cattle with brown and cream spotted coats roamed in groups down toward a stream and young boys thin and shirtless chased after them. The boys sprang as they ran, light on their feet and if the window was open I knew I would hear the rattle of cow bells and the long whistles and shouts from the boys of *Iwe! Iwe!* to the cattle they were tending. In a recently tilled field, a woman worked bent over with a machete. The soil was a dark blood red brown and after so much stagnancy, it was relief to see the land being worked. The woman wore a *duik* headscarf and a skirt wrapped with a once colorful African cloth called a zambia; she was bent at the waist, her back straight but angled down toward the earth she

worked. Alone in the ten foot square field, she raised her machete into the air behind her and then down again. I watched her, arms raised and down, raised and down, until she was out of sight, thankful to see someone working a field deep red with the dampness of freshly tilled soil.

The Harare-Masvingo Road was full of signs of the spring burn—charred grass burnt black to the soil and scorched lower trunks of old msasa trees that had survived many years spring bush burnings, but we were nearly to Harare before I saw a fire itself. In the distance, I saw the grey plume of thick grey smoke ring in the clear day sky and as we rounded a curve, I looked back at the smoke plume and saw the bright orange flames of the fire itself. In spring, farmers light the fields on fire to clear out the old maize stalks and the grass that's grown up in winter. Often the fires burn far more than the fields they intended. I think of times I'd driven outside Harare at night and seen the long line of fire advancing quickly across an open field, hot orange in the deep blackness of night.

Though late-October was still early, and the charred grass in the fields mean most likely the *bumharutsva* rains hadn't yet come, there still should have been more fields along this road tilled for the upcoming growing season. The land between Harare and Masvingo was home to some of Zimbabwe's most fertile land and used to be mostly large commercial maize and tobacco farms. In *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, Peter Godwin writes about flying over Zimbabwe in 2002 at the beginning of the growing season. He describes the patchwork of square green maize fields and circular irrigation patches that he used to see that time of year, but in 2002, at the height of the fast track land redistribution, most of the

commercial farms had ceased production or been returned to communal farmers who, despite government promises for inputs, had only regular access to machetes and third-rate seed. In 2002, Godwin looks down at the land in central Zimbabwe and sees mostly tall grass fields. From the bus window, between Harare and Masvingo, I didn't see a single commercial farm field tilled for the upcoming growing season.

The bus kept forward at its own clipping speed and the grassland fields began to give way to the high brick durawalls of businesses and acreages. We were painfully close to the city now. I wanted the bus to speed up and just get there already and I wanted it to slow down, to let me understand what it meant to be back, to prepare myself for reentering a city I had spent the last six years remembering. But I couldn't. There was nothing that could prepare me for that.

A large green sign advertised the tobacco auction floor and the huge warehouse building stretched out far to the back of the grounds, well beyond my view. Besides a few bales of yellow-brown dried tobacco piled on top of one another and a couple of semi-trucks parked in the front loading area, the tobacco auction house looked dark and empty.

At the first major intersection on Beatrice road, waiting at the first stoplight we'd passed since South Africa, I looked at the cars and buses in the other lanes, middle of the line Mazda 323s, Nissan trucks, white mini-bus taxis, a few delivery trucks, and a sprinkling of foreign luxury cars. Not so different from before. The roads weren't empty. On the western corner of the intersection a huge billboard asked: *Migrating?* in white slanted letters against a

blue background. In darker, bolder letters the voice of authority said: *Travel Legally*. Where was the “Welcome to Harare, Sunshine City” sign I used to know? Though from the direction it faced, the “Travel Legally” sign was obviously meant for those exiting Zimbabwe via the Masvingo-Beitbridge Road, it served as an ominous welcome sign. It felt like a floodlight on a chain-link border fence, like handcuffs and rifle butts, like the miles of coiled razor wire at the South Africa-Zimbabwe border.

When I’d lived in Zimbabwe in 2000 and 2001, brain drain and mass migration were gutting the country of its best and brightest. It seemed everyone who could was leaving—to college in Canada, the U.K., to a cousin in Texas, an auntie in Sydney, to Botswana, South Africa. The exodus had been in full force. The newspapers were full of ads that said, ‘Emigrating everything must go.’ Toward the end of my stay in 2001, it seemed all I did was go to going away parties and send offs at the airport. The lines at the South African and U.S. embassies snaked out into the street each morning, and vendors set up shop, making a living selling drinks and sweets to those waiting all day in lines. In 2007, most sources estimated about 3 million Zimbabweans, or a quarter of Zimbabwe’s population, lived abroad, with most in neighboring South Africa, Mozambique, and Botswana and large amounts in the U.K., U.S., Canada, and Australia. Given those official numbers, the high number of unofficial Zimbabwean migrants, and nothing but bad news coming out of Zimbabwe in the six years I’d been gone, I half expected to find a ghost-town when I arrived in Harare that afternoon. I wondered if I would be able to feel the absence of over 3 million people on the

once crowded streets of downtown Harare. Would I find the city empty, the shops and restaurants I used to know closed down, the shop owners gone?

Cellphones rang shrill in the bus and people shuffled their baggage around, shoving blankets and the leftovers of lunch back into bags. The streets to either side were lined with cars and factories. I looked for signs of life from the factory smoke stacks, but they sat quiet, and for the first time in my life, I was sad not to see grey white smoke rising from an industrial park. The driver switched off the Kenny Rogers cd and turned the radio to 3FM, Zimbabwe's pop station. In a quick, exaggerated voice full of dramatically stretched vowels and quick clipped consonants, the radio announcer said without a trace of irony after the station id, that 2007-2008 was to be the 'mother of all agriculture seasons.' I thought of the fallow fields grown tall with elephant grass I'd passed.

Yeah right, I thought. And just as I nearly slipped into a deep funk, I peered down a residential street and saw the gnarled branches of the jacaranda trees still crowned with purple blooms. I had made it on time. Hopefully my luck would hold and hopefully the *bumharutsva* rains would pound down the fertile land shortly and clear the ash away.

CHAPTER 3. POWER

I stood, two black duffel bags at my feet, on the driveway of Small World Backpackers Lodge in Avondale, a suburb of Harare, where the taxi had dropped me. No one came to greet me.

At midday, quiet hung like wood smoke inside the compound. The guard in the green uniform, who had woken up only long enough to open the black metal gate for me, had returned to his perch on the stool in the shade, cap drawn over his face, head drooping in sleep. There were no signs pointing me toward guest check-in. The hostel compound was a maze of passages and doors that led off from the cream-colored stucco main house to new brick wings at the back and sides of the compound. Terracotta pots bursting with green elephant ear caladiums, calla lilies, and cycads lined the buildings and the jagged tops of palm trees and wind torn banana leaves peeked over the roofs, making the lodge feel more like a botanic garden than a densely built boarding house. From the walkway, I could see the curved edge of the swimming pool and the grass-thatched patio roof. I looked forward to lounging there in the warm sun and acclimating to my new environment.

At the bus station a few hours ago, my friend Francis hadn't been there to meet me. The bus had been late getting in and Francis had had to return to his work at a bank downtown. When we'd pulled into the crowded terminal in downtown Harare, people swarmed everywhere, barely moving out of the bus's path. I felt their hands slap the sides of the bus and through the closed bus windows could hear them already shouting to the

passengers, advertising their taxi and luggage carrying services. Men squealed, “Whoa driver!” and whistled loudly, directed the bus into a parking spot. The moment the bus had stopped moving, the crowd was upon us, banging on the door and pushing metal luggage carts into the way of the passengers getting off. Knowing I would be I know I would be an instant target the second my white foreign face and huge American backpack were seen, I took a deep breath and steeled myself. I’d done this so many times before on trips from Harare to other towns, fighting with drivers and passengers, pushing my way through crowds by sheer force. But it had been so long. I was out of practice. My nerves weren’t yet steeled. I had wanted just to stay inside the bus until Francis came in to get me, but hearing the luggage being unloaded from the underneath compartment, I knew I needed to get out and claim mine to make sure it wasn’t stolen.

Standing in the seething parking lot, I knew I’d never see Francis in the crowd and hoped, as the only white person there, he would easily spot me.

“Taxi madam! Taxi!” men had called pushing toward me.

“Good price madam! Good price!” the men with the luggage carts shouted, pushing their wooden and metal carts in my direction. My only defense was to pretend I was deaf and blind and to keep my senses alert for any hands tugging at the zippers of my backpack or the straps of the bag across my chest. Francis showed up a half an hour later, just as I had given up and was about to give in to one of the relentless taxi drivers. In a blue oversized suit with his yellow tie swinging, Francis rushed up to me and slapped my hand.

“Wadzoka here?” he asked. *You have arrived?*

He smiled, but he looked anxious, strained. He was barely a head taller than me and the large suit made him look even smaller, like he was playing dress up in an older man’s clothes, taking on an older man’s responsibilities and mannerisms. He got a taxi for me, negotiating the rate before the driver could see it was for a white person and triple the price. We rode in the back of the blue Rixi taxi, speeding through the streets of downtown Harare. I had feared the city might be visibly empty given the huge number of Zimbabweans that had emigrated over the last six years, or that the streets and buildings would be in horrible disrepair, but it bustled with life and the glass and steel skyscrapers gleamed in the afternoon light.

“Sha,” Francis had said, using the informal version of *shamwari*, the Shona word for ‘friend.’ “I’m going to have to drop you at the lodge and get back to the bank.”

At the gate, he paid the driver and handed me a wad of red Zimbabwean bills. I shook my head and tried to refuse.

“It’s only a few million,” he said. His small, almond shaped eyes insisted. “You’ll need it to get some things.”

I nodded and took the stack of bills.

“Welcome home,” he’d called rushing back to the cab. “Settle in. Rest. I’ll call you at the lodge tomorrow and see about having you out to my house in Budiriro to see the family.”

At the lodge, the guard slept alone on the stool in the shade. The only human sound I heard was a male voice escaping in clips of laughter and conversation from somewhere inside the main stucco building. I squared my shoulders, set my lips and eyes in a sharp gaze, trying to appear sophisticated and entitled—two traits essential for dealing with Zimbabwe’s lackadaisical service industry—and followed the bits of laughter to an open doorway in the main house. I dropped my bags at my feet in front of the reception desk in the dark hallway. A thin young man in a pale yellow button up shirt stood behind a counter in front of an open log book. He was talking to a woman slumped in a chair in the far corner of the dark office. Until my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, I couldn’t see the woman, her head leaning against the plaster wall and had briefly wondered if the young man was mad.

When he saw me enter, the receptionist stopped talking. His face went serious, almost grave. I tried to keep my entitled posture, but my shoulders kept slumping with weariness.

“May I help you?” he asked, his voice rising at the end of the question, full of holdover British-colonial formality.

I was exhausted from the 18-hour bus ride up from Johannesburg. My arms and legs felt weighted by extra gravity, and my mind was moth chewed. Any thoughts beyond my immediate needs kept falling through the holes. I barely cared that I was back in Harare for the first time in six years. All I wanted was to take a shower, get out of the clothes I’d been wearing for two days, and lie down.

“I have a reservation,” I told him curtly, my eyes locking on his. He looked away. “Rogers, Kimberly,” I said and waited.

He shuffled around looking in various leather bound, hand-written ledger books spread throughout the office. The woman on the chair pulled her legs up, tucking them beneath her skirt, and said nothing.

“Rogers?” he asked, his long fingers paging through the ledgers. “When did you make the booking?” He was probably 18 or 20 at the most, and he moved his thin body around the inside of the office in the loose jointed way children move, as though gravity affected them less. His dark hair was closely cropped to his head and he did not smile.

“I made it online,” I told him, “Sometime in September. I have a copy of my reservation here.” I tapped the black satchel strung across my chest.

“Ah, here it is,” he called to me. “A single for one week.”

I could almost feel myself collapsing on the bed in my room.

He pulled out another ledger, laid it between us on the counter and flipped to where the writing stopped. From upside down, I tried to read the name and date of the last guest and was relieved when I saw it was only a few days earlier.

“There’s one more thing,” he said, thin shoulders slumping up to his ears. He looked down at the floor and put the pen he was going to hand to me down on the counter.

“Also,” he said, “You should know. . .” He paused, trailing off, then blurted out, “We have no power now.”

He stood motionless behind the counter, looking through me to the courtyard outside, steeled for my response.

Of course there was no power. This was Africa, at the very least a radio should have been blaring, or more likely, a radio *and* tv simultaneously. The whole place was so empty and silent, asleep in midday. For the first time I took in how dark the inside of the office was. The only light came from the two open windows. The track of fluorescent lighting above was unused. I had been too sleepy and steeled for confrontation to notice. I thought of the security guard in the green uniform sleeping deeply on the stool near the gate and of the packet of white utility candles in my bag that I’d bought in Johannesburg.

I stared dumbfounded and sleep-deprived at the front deskman, trying to understand what no power would mean to me. Of course the power was off. But what difference did it make anyway? I was too tired to go anywhere else and had few other options.

In the six years I’d been away, most hostels and hotels in Zimbabwe had closed. The big hotels like Meikles and The Jameson had stayed, but as I found out when I tried to book accommodation for this trip, most of the hostels I’d known in 2001 no longer existed. I’d sat going through my outdated copy of *Lonely Planet* and crossing off lodge after lodge, after looking them up online and finding them gone. I had been thankful to find Small World still open.

I thought again about how big the tourism industry had been in Zimbabwe. In 1998, when I was there as an undergraduate, Westerners and wealthy Africans had flooded the game parks and upscale hotels in downtown Harare. Harare's cafes and restaurants were often crowded with American, Asian, and European tourists, their guidebooks out, speaking broken Shona to a server who, smiled graciously and complimented their language ability.

"It's okay," I told the front deskman. "I'll stay," I said, nodding at him. Where else was I going to go?

His expressionless face went loose into a wide smile.

"The power has been off already a few days," he said, instantly chatty. "They were doing some road work on Argyle and hit a power line. The whole grid's out."

I had seen the gaping pothole in the taxi on the way there. The driver had swerved quickly to avoid it and I had looked back to see a hole as large as a sofa in the blacktop. There were orange construction cones around the hole, but no workmen in sight.

"We are expecting the power back at any time," the receptionist assured me. He shrugged his shoulders easily, looked up at the dark track of fluorescent lights on the ceiling and repeated, "Any time, any time."

I signed the logbook where he had Xed, agreeing to stay for one week, power or no power.

My room was a small single in the middle of a long line of rooms at the back of the lodge compound. The rooms all had the names of African cities printed on signs on their closed doors— Nairobi, Cape Town, Accra. Mine was Arusha, the Tanzanian city where, in 1993, Rwandan forces signed a peace agreement that many argue set the stage for the 1994 genocide.

The receptionist, who had introduced himself as Tafara, unlocked the room with the long skeleton key and held the door open for me. When I entered, bags in tow, my hand went instinctively to the light switch. Nothing happened. I remembered and laughed, throwing open the hand-sewn curtains to let the daylight in instead. Opening the metal latch, I pushed the panes of both windows open, sticking my arm outside into the sunshine. Most windows in Zimbabwe didn't have screens and I loved being able to open the room completely to the air and sun outside.

The room was clean and quiet and the polished earth floor gleamed from a recent waxing. It had everything I needed. In the corner there were shelves and a curtain rod to hang clothes on. There was a small table with a chair in the other corner, and a bed with linens and a pillow. Next to the bed was a table with a lamp on it. *Not going to be using that*, I thought and smiled.

Tafara stood outside the door as I looked around the room. I dug out one US dollar from the envelopes in my black satchel. It reminded me that I had no idea the value of the five million Zimbabwe dollars Francis had given me. Was it worth \$2 US dollars or \$20?

“Maita basa,” I told Tafara, placing the bill in his hand. “Thank you for your work.”

“The toilet with shower is two doors down,” he said and disappeared, his light footsteps soundless.

I left the door open, letting in as much light as possible and unpacked the groceries I’d bought in Johannesburg. I lined the top of the desk in the corner with bags of sugar and salt, a 5 kg bag of Tastic rice, and a box of muesli with a gigantic white woman’s face smiling as she brought a heaping spoonful of oats and dried fruits to her mouth. Feeling like I was camping, I dug out my flashlight and toothbrush, preparing for the coming darkness.

At six p.m., the sun went down, throwing long, golden rays through the thin acacia leaves and onto the brick courtyard. Sitting at one of three metal patio tables in the courtyard, I watched the light fade, trying to stay awake until at least eight or nine. The dipping sun kept stretching the tree-shaped shadows longer and thinner until by seven it was completely dark. I didn’t want to go back to my room, didn’t want to close the door and sit alone in the dark in those awful moments before sleep. I hated first nights anywhere, the body and mind still confused, wondering where are we? Why did we come here? Earlier, while I was heating water on the gas stove in the shared kitchen, I had watched the staff members disappear into the unrented rooms in the main house and close the doors behind them. I assumed they were sleeping there, maybe to save bus fare. With the sun down and the staff asleep, I couldn’t think of a single good reason to keep sitting outside alone and went back reluctantly to my room. Lying down on the foam mattress, I talked myself through the worries that kept

creeping in. *Ok fear I see you. Ok loneliness. Ok maybe-everybody-was-right-I-had-no-business-coming-back-here, come on in too.* On the other side of the world, I'd spent so much time thinking of this country, this city, and now, back for the first time, lying in a dark room alone, I couldn't feel any connection between me and this place. It felt as foreign as if I'd never been here. In the morning, I would try to call my boyfriend back at home in Iowa and maybe talking to him would cheer me up, give me some sense of grounding. *Give it time,* I told myself and fell off to sleep.

In the morning, bright light came in around the edges of the closed curtains. Without trying any light switches, I knew the power was still out by the thick quietness in the compound. No radio or human voices interrupted the pied crows cawing from the tree tops outside the security fence, their wings slicing the air as they swooped to pick at bits of trash and fight each other.

In the shared kitchen, I heated a pot of water on the gas stove. When I peeked in the reception office, I was disappointed not to find Tafara there. The only person around was the woman who been slumped in the corner yesterday. She sat in the lounge area off from the office, pressing buttons intently on her cell phone.

“Good morning,” she said in English without looking up.

I ate a bowl of oatmeal and drank roobios tea in the sunlit courtyard. Two cats, one grey with no tail and only one-eye and an orange tabby with short, dusty fur followed me,

meowing. They kept rubbing themselves against my legs, begging for food. They weren't the kind of cats I wanted to pet, but as my only company, I didn't shoo them away.

Sitting at one of the three metal tables circled with empty chairs in the courtyard, I looked around at the still buildings. With the power off, the filter on the pool couldn't run. The still water was greening over and the surface was full of dead leaves and bugs. At the back of the courtyard, out of reach of the sun, an indoor bar connected to a lounge sat empty and dark. Two futon style couches faced each other with a radio in between and a binder of cds with titles like Zimbabwe Party Mix scrawled in marker. I could almost see the ghosts of unshaven backpackers who had gathered here in rowdy groups sharing beer, cigarettes, and stories of African adventure, flirting with one another at the empty courtyard tables and on the wooden stools in the bar.

With all its corridors and rows of rooms, Small World could probably hold 40 people, but only two rooms besides mine were occupied. A black African family stayed in one of the rooms in the main house and were hardly ever there. There was a mom, dad, and at least one kid. They were all chubby in the way rich Africans like to be—big bellies and fleshy faces, the men in shorts and sandals, the women's pedicured feet jammed tightly into heeled sandals. They spoke Shona to one another and drove a Toyota truck with Zimbabwean plates. I assumed they were Zim expats back for a visit or business otherwise I couldn't understand why they would be staying at a lodge.

In the single room two doors down from mine with the name plate, 'Nairobi,' on the door, was an American named Mark. I'd heard him earlier in the reception office asking in the flat American accent we shared if he'd received any calls. On his way back to his room, he'd passed by where I was sitting in the courtyard and said nothing to me. I think both of our hearts sank when we saw each other. Part of the fun of travelling to out of the way places like Zimbabwe was the novelty of being the only one of your kind somewhere. And now here we were to ruin our own uniqueness for each other.

Later, when we were both reading with our doors open to pass the long stretch between afternoon and dinner, he came out. I had my door open to catch as much of the fading light as possible and was dreading the sun's inevitable setting.

"I can't believe the power's out," he said to the open door of my room. "I'm thinking of going some place else, what about you?"

I came out and leaned against my doorway. "No, I'm staying. I booked for a week."

He was probably in his mid-forties. His gray-brown hair was cropped short on the sides and he slicked the longer front part back loosely with gel.

"I'm Mark," he said extending his hand like we were closing a deal. "Where you from?" he asked.

"Iowa these days, but originally from outside Chicago. What about you?" I asked.

He hedged. “Well, it’s kind of hard to say. In the U.S., I last lived in Colorado, but I haven’t really lived there in years.”

He was wearing the kind of grey athletic shorts that dry quickly and a fitted polo shirt. He told me he’d come from South Africa a few days ago. I could picture him at a table with burly Afrikaner men downing beers.

“This place is fucking fucked,” he said. “The inflation, it’s incredible.” He stood a few inches closer to my face than I liked.

“What are you here for?” he asked.

“I’m back to visit,” I told him, loving that simply being in Zimbabwe was suspect.

“I used to live here in 2000.”

He looked at me like I was conning him. “A visit?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

I nodded. We both knew Zim was full of government spies who had their eyes out for foreigners who might be working undercover as journalists. We looked at each other, wondering which was more likely the other’s occupation—government spy or reporter?

“I’m in real estate,” he said. He looked over his shoulder. “The property is still too high here. The houses are beautiful, nice lawns, but what they want for them.” He shook his head. “You practically run the place yourself. A generator for electricity, a well for your

water. But it's safer here than in Columbia. Jesus there you have to hire your own personal bodyguard."

I was trying to piece together the bits of information, but the narrative of his life kept shifting. Columbia, Tanzania, South Africa, Angola, Sri Lanka, he jumped from one to the other.

"A friend knows someone who can get me the resident rate for a hotel in town," he said. Zim had a two tiered tourism system with different rates for local and international visitors. The difference was sometimes as much as 500 percent. "I'm thinking of leaving. Once the sun goes down," Mark said, "There's nothing to do here. There's not even a bar."

He looked down the corridor toward the kitchen.

"What are you doing for food here?" Mark asked and I told him I had mostly been making instant oatmeal or soups on the stove in the kitchen.

"There's a place behind the Avondale shops," he said, "A nice café. They've got salads and stuff besides that heavy corn meal everyone likes here." Mark was talking about *sadza*, the staple food of Zimbabwe, made from ground maize and cooked like grits, but denser and stiff enough to stand up on its own. Zimbabweans preferred it to rice and ate it with their hands, using it to sop up the soup of meat and vegetable stews. I hadn't had *sadza* in years and was looking forward to having a big, heavy helping with a side of cooking greens Zimbabweans called *muriwo*.

“I’d go with you for dinner,” he said, “but I’m meeting a friend who’s going to show me some houses.”

I’d met Mark in the early evening of my first day in Zimbabwe after spending the afternoon scouring the nearby Avondale shops for signs of the changes brought about by Zimbabwe’s economic crisis. After a late oatmeal breakfast on the patio, I’d taken a cold shower in the dark bathroom, my body wincing at the freezing water and dressed quickly, excited to head out of the hostel and explore the new Zimbabwe and see what was left of the Zimbabwe I remembered. I slung a black messenger bag across my chest and walked the blacktop bike path on Argyle Street toward the shops. The sun warmed my arms and face and prickled the skin where the messenger bag rested on my left hip with sweat. The air was dry as sand, blowing in short gusts that stirring up the exposed red earth on the sides of the path. Clearly the *bumharutsva* rains had not yet come to Harare either. I felt my skin begin to itch in the dryness and kept reapplying lip balm. Two blocks from the hostel, I was already thirsty, but after so many days of sitting in the bus and on planes, it felt good to stretch my legs in long strides in the open air.

My ears were still fresh to the sounds of Zimbabwe. An openness in the landscape, even in the Avondale suburbs, allowed sound to travel differently. Far off noises arrived more fully, as though a lightness in the air carried them easier. The back and forth of far-off groups of men talking and laughing as they walked rang round and clear the way sounds at home did only in the quiet twilight hours. The wheel whoosh and clank of car engines echoed

off the durawall fences surrounding the houses on both sides of the street and the shrill caw of black and white pied crows rose like an alto above it all.

At mid-day few other people were out. Inside my chest, a hot tightness burned and alternated on and off like a blast furnace. Joy. *Fear*. Joy. It was my first time alone on the streets of Harare in six years. I felt like Ebenezer Scrooge throwing open the windows on Christmas morning. I wanted to announce to every person I passed, ‘I’m back. I’ve been gone six years, but now I’m back’ as though the city itself registered my absence and my return. Alternately, I wanted to be invisible. I thought of what my dad had said on the phone when I told him I was returning to Zimbabwe. “Those people are starving,” he’d said. “They’ll kill you for one U.S. dollar.” The sun warm on my face and arms, walking in long strides, I shook my head at his words. What did he know, he’d never been here? Yet, every few steps, joy and fear changed places, flexing themselves tight within my chest.

Houses encircled with steep walls lined the bike path. Only their sprawling tiled roofs, satellite dishes, and palm tree tops peeked over the fences. Red-pink bougainvillea vines curled over the security fences and hung iridescent, bridging the private space on the inside of the walls and the public part that spilled over onto the streetside. The gardens outside the houses’ walls were landscaped with yucca and agave plants, rose bushes, and the purple and pink blossoms of the yesterday, today, and tomorrow bushes. Well watered, thick, green grass spread like carpet from the gardens all the way to the street. The grass was almost obscenely lush at this dry season before the summer rains, and in my thirst, I wanted to cup my hands and drink the dew that clung to the blades of a recently watered lawn. A black

gardener in a blue union work suit was crouched down pulling weeds in front of one yard. When I walked by he looked up from his work and nodded to me.

“Hello,” I said to him in English, wondering if he would find me greeting him in Shona insulting, as though I’m assuming he doesn’t know English.

Maskati, I thought to myself, remembering the Shona greeting for the afternoon.

Because it was daylight, it was impossible to tell simply from walking by that these gorgeous houses with their sprawling gardens did not have electricity. At night, you could hear the hum of the diesel generator, but in the daylight all looked normal. It was equally impossible for me to guess what the people who lived in these manicured, enormous homes did in the worst economy in the world to afford them. When I’d left Zimbabwe in 2001, Avondale had still been primarily a white suburb, but perhaps the economic crisis and the mass departure of the white Zimbabwean population had shifted fortunes and these homes now belonged to the black upperclass that were building their wealth from the crisis.

A group of men in coverall work suits stomped up the path in their gumboots, empty Coke bottles swinging in their hands as they returned to their work from lunch. A few other men in pleated dress pants and button up shirts walked past, talking into tightly held cellphones. On the side of the bike path a woman was seated on a fold of Zambia print cloth selling small piles of tomatoes, bananas, onions, and single hard candies from a makeshift cardboard stand. When I passed by, neither the woman at the stand nor the groups of men

looked or said anything to me. Joy and fear still constricting and expanding, I was both relieved and disappointed to be so invisible.

At the intersection of Argyle and Prince Edward, the stoplight hung uselessly from a black chord strung between streets. It was on the same power grid as the lodge, and its yellow, green, and red lights remained dark, cars using the intersection as a four way stop. I passed the pothole that was the source of the electrical outage. Exposed pipes ran across inside the deep hole and below the pipes was a pool of slack, black water. Four orange cones marked the edges of the hole and a road sign that read ‘caution work in progress’ was tacked to a sawhorse facing the oncoming traffic.

Surprisingly, the Avondale shops looked mostly the same as they did in 2001. Despite nearly seven years of fuel shortages, white mini-bus taxis still ran up and down King George Highway, honking their horns and calling for passengers. The busses waited in the same spot they had in 2001, near a curve in the fence that lined the shopping complex entrance. I watched the passengers stoop as they climbed in and out of busses packed four to a row. Bon Marche and TM grocery stores were still there, and so was the Rainbow 7 Arts movie theater where years before I’d watched *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* and *East is East* in a theater crowded with wealthy Indian teenagers, thick cologne from the men choking the air.

Everything across King George Boulevard had power. Lights were on inside the shops and Beyonce’s ‘Crazy in Love’ played from the open air curry stand. I walked the shopping complex taking a body count. Edgars clothing, still there, Nando’s Chicken, still

there. Most surprisingly, Scoops, the gelato shop was still open. Gelato seemed like it would be the first to go during hard times and milk shortages, but there it was still open. Inside, two young women in denim skirts leaned over the glass counter pointing at the tins of chocolate and banana. Rather than everything shutting down as I'd expected, new shops like an imported home furnishings store with leopard print chaise lounges and a video rental store had opened up. The blacktop parking lot at the center of the shops was nearly full. Next to old Mazda 323 hatchbacks, shiny white Landcruisers and brand new Nissan double-cab trucks sat gleaming in the sun.

If the exterior of the shops looked eerily normal, inside the cracks were showing. The TM grocery store was dominated by white space. Fluorescent lights shone onto empty aisles and were reflected back up on the polished floors making me squint. At the front, a few cashiers stood bored at their tills staring out the windows into the parking lot. Without excess products stocked on the tops of the aisles, the high ceilings made the store feel gigantic and exposed, more like an airplane hangar than a store. The shelves were not bare though, as the news stories often reported, but products were stacked only one item deep and many staple products, like milk, bread, and rice were missing entirely. In the cereal aisle, single boxes of Willard's Corn Flakes stood precariously at the edge of the shelves. There were only ten boxes of cereal, but they were lined up singly to cover maximum shelf space. If I took one, a bare gap of shelf would be left behind.

Between the boxes, large gaps of exposed white shelf collected dust and I saw easily all the way to the bare back of the shelf. At the back of the store, empty cooler boxes that had

held one liter bottles of Coke and Castle Lager, hummed in the quiet of the shop. Of the ten or so coolers ringing the back wall, only two had anything in them and even those had just a few bottles of Sparletta Cherry Plum. In the health and beauty aisle, there was body lotion, but no shampoo, bar soap, but no laundry soap. In the produce section, green beans and lettuce sat wilting.

What there was was plenty of expensive products imported from South Africa. One liter containers of Ceres fruit juice were stacked five deep and ten high. For 2.5 million dollars, or roughly 3 dollars, I could get a liter of mango or guava. Trying to understand what the amounts meant, I converted all the prices back to US dollars. Keeping track of the zeroes on my fingers, made my head spin. One is to eight hundred thousand, I divided mentally, lost track and started all over again.

I remembered shopping at this TM years ago with two other Americans a few days after I'd arrived for my second trip to Zimbabwe. It was early January 2000, before the fuel and foreign currency shortages hit a few weeks later, before I was aware of the resettlement starting on the farms throughout the countryside. I pushed my cart around the aisles filling it with chocolate biscuits, pasta, yogurt, mangoes, and mushrooms. I was 23, just out of undergraduate and in Zimbabwe for a year on my own. Selecting a bunch of ripe bananas that Sunday afternoon, I'd felt myself testing my new independence, my adulthood. After four years in college dorms and summer breaks back at home with my parents, I was alone and could pick any foods I wanted. I'd looked the bananas over—too green still, another

bunch too ripe and showing black spots—the year stretched out before me then, a series of meals I would prepare how I wanted for the first time in my own kitchen.

Six years, a Masters degree, and more than five kitchens later, I brought the few items I needed to the front of the same store. At the till, I clumsily counted out stacks of 200,000 bills, using a five pile system modified from a summer I'd spent as a bank teller, except this time instead of five twenties equaling a hundred dollars, each pile of five bills equaled a million. For 4.2 million, I got two onions and because the store didn't have bottled water, a bottle of Cherry Plum soda and a few cans of Schweppes ginger ale.

“This is too much,” the cashier said when I handed her the pile of cash. Scowling, she gave me back one red 200,000 bill.

I shook my head, never imagining that I would ever accidentally give anyone 200,000 dollars too much.

It was all so absurd. Power outages, shelves stocked one item deep, twenty different flavors of gelato, shiny new Toyota Landcruisers, and the soft, late spring sun shining warmly on it all. It seemed the economic crisis was turning the country on its head, mixing the winners and the losers up so frequently that it was impossible to keep straight who was on top and who was on bottom. The chronic shortages of basic food items meant Zimbabweans had to draw on all resources available to get the things they needed. Upper-class Zimbabweans now shopped at the ramshackle market in the poor township, Mbare, because things could be found there that were not on the shelves in the fancier supermarkets

in the rich suburbs. And those from the poorer townships took buses into the wealthier suburbs looking for items that had been sold out in the shops in their own neighborhood.

The bottles clinked in my bag as I walked past houses hidden behind security walls, gates opening to let Pajeros in. Since 2000, nearly every international headline about Zimbabwe had contained metaphors of destruction. “Zimbabwe Descends into Chaos,” “Zimbabwe Teeters on the Brink of Collapse,” “Zimbabwe Inflation Spirals Toward Ruin.” There was no milk in the stores, but there was mango juice from South Africa. So this was collapse, I thought. From far away reading those headlines, I had wondered what it meant for a country to collapse. A country was not an empty structure. When pieces caved in, the people didn’t go with it into a sink hole. Twelve million people still lived in Zimbabwe, the buildings still stood, fuel and food were found somehow, even if they were not in the shops, and though the center was weak and much was missing, the country had not sunk into a fissure and disappeared as ruin, collapse, and chaos implied.

Walking back to the lodge past the well watered gardens of Harare’s elite it was clear that more than just surviving, some Zimbabweans had found a way to thrive on the pot-holed surface of Zimbabwe’s economy.

At the lodge the light was starting to fade. I heard Mark leave to meet his friends and watched a staff member go from room to room putting white utility candles into Coke bottles

covered in wax drippings. She placed them on the counters in the kitchen, the bar, and in the three rooms that were occupied, but in order to preserve the candles, she did not light them.

In the courtyard I was finishing my dinner of rice and vegetables, hoping I could keep the sun up through sheer will. The dark space between sunset and morning was hard. Without a car, once the sun went down I was trapped. It wasn't safe for me to walk anywhere, nor was it a good idea to go to a bar by myself. Taxis were expensive because of the high cost of fuel and most of my friends lived in far off townships. After just one night at the lodge, I had come to hate the long light of the sunset. Even if the electricity had been on, I still would have felt imprisoned and lonely.

From the reception office, a woman's voice shouted, "How long have we been without electricity?"

"A week? Why didn't you call me?"

Her voice was loud, full of authority. I couldn't hear the staff members' reply.

She stormed into the shared kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Everything's gone warm," she said to the staff members that followed her. Her hair was dreadlocked and hung past her shoulders.

"What are people eating and drinking?" she asked and no one replied. In the bar at the back of the lodge, she opened the cooler and pulled out a brown bottle of Castle Lager, prying the cap off with the top of another unopened bottle.

“Jesus Christ, it’s warm as piss,” she muttered and moved about the lodge grounds quickly, opening cabinets and doors. The staff members followed her nervously.

I was fascinated. She had broken two major gender rules already. Zimbabwean women did not swear and they did not drink beer like men. Sure, Zimbabwean women drank and swore, but not like men, not in this bold manner.

“We need a generator,” she said, taking a long draw of her beer.

“How long have you been staying here without power?” she asked, turning to where I was sitting in the courtyard.

I was startled at first. Most of the staff members had ignored me unless I searched them out with specific needs or questions.

“Just a few nights,” I said.

“But it’s not right.” She shook her head and her hair slapped against her shoulder. “What are you going to think of our place coming here, living in darkness?”

“Why didn’t anyone call me?” she asked the silent staff members.

At 7 o’clock it was completely dark. In my room, I read with a miner style flashlight on my head. I was trying to stay awake until at least nine, but my concentration was poor. I kept reading the same sentence over and over again. At the front of the lodge, the metal gate

slid open and music from a car stereo filled the lodge compound. The high trill of electric guitar in Zimbabwean *sungura* music echoed off the brick walls of the lodge in waves and bounced up into the silent night sky. The car engine cut, but the driver left the stereo on, the music pulsing into the night.

The voice of the dreadlocked woman greeting the new arrivals rose up loud and excited, followed by the clap of hands slapping and the hiss of beer bottles opening. They talked loudly in Shona, laughing. After so much silence, it was nice to hear life in the lodge compound. I thought of my friend Francis who'd been telling me it was bad for me to stay alone so much at the lodge. I closed my book, put my flip flops on and went out to the courtyard to join them.

“Sister!” the dreadlocked woman called to me when she saw me standing in the courtyard. “Come and join us.”

The dreadlocked woman, two men and another woman gathered at a table next to the open door of the truck. Candles flickered in their bottles on the table, lighting only a few inches around them. One of the men pulled a chair over and the woman patted it for me to sit down next to her.

“I’m called Grace,” she said, and pointing at the other woman, “She’s Tendai and they are David and Farai.”

“You want some beer?” she asked and in Shona ordered the other woman to get it for me.

“Shame, love that you have been staying here with no power.” She slapped my thigh and laughed. “These people,” she shook her head and her dreadlocks slapped at her shoulder. “They should have called me, you know?” She poured some beer from the brown one liter bottle into my glass.

“It’s warm, but hey, it is beer.”

I thanked her and she slapped my thigh again.

“Sha, this is Africa,” she said, using the shortened for version of *shamwari*, or friend. The two men clicked their beers together. “To Zimbabwe,” they said, swallowing hard.

I clinked my glass with hers.

“You know Macheso?” she asked, gesturing to the stereo in the truck. I nodded. Alick Macheso was the king of *sungura* music, a Zimbabwean style that combined Congolese-influenced rhumba with dance-beat jiti. Macheso had become *the* sound of Harare, the high electric guitars and call and response vocals playing from the buses running to and from the city center.

“Sha, play that one about Madhuwe. Aish! I love that one.”

She jumped into the passenger seat and fiddled with the cd player. The songs all began with long instrumental intros and she waited through each one for the opening lyrics, then skipped to the next song. The two guys kept shouting instructions.

“Yeah this is the one,” she cried turning the volume up. Macheso’s golden voice sang above the trill of guitar and into the dark beyond the candle flicker. Grace danced in the middle of the circle of chairs, singing along and moving her hips to the slow parts.

“This song is saying for men not to fall in love with the woman, Madhube, because she already has a boyfriend,” said the man in the leather jacket. “He is singing about life and love. These are problems we all have and it makes us forget the difficulty of life here now.”

I tipped my glass back and drank long. It was warm, but still a decent beer, full of sharp hops. Still dancing, Grace refilled my glass.

“This is how we do it in Zimbabwe,” she said, gesturing to the car and the brown bottles of beer. The guy in the leather jacket was up dancing with Tendai. “There’s no power, but we make our own party.” She laughed and slapped my hand hard.

“Go back and tell your friends in America that we in Zimbabwe are fine.”

“Tiribho muZimbabwe,” she said, repeating ‘we are fine in Zimbabwe’ in Shona.

In the morning Grace and her friends were gone. Sunlight lit up the compound, bringing back the details of buildings and plants that had been just dark shapes in the night. The lodge seemed like two different places at night and in the daylight. No trace of last night’s party remained. The chairs were back in their usual places circling the empty tables

and not even an empty bottle remained. Mark was already dressed in his polo shirt and grey shorts and was on the phone in the reception office.

Seeing him there reminded me that I hadn't yet called home. My family would be worried and so would my boyfriend back in Iowa, but honestly I really didn't feel like calling them. I hated the strained difficulty of trying to bridge the distance. The two lives were so different. It was hard to know which person to be, my American self, or my Zimbabwean self. The time difference only made it worse, with the days and nights reversed, one person on the end of the phone ready to start the day, the other just ending theirs.

"Mangwani," Tafara called from behind the reception desk. Telling me 'good morning' in Shona.

I was beginning to get used to not having electricity. I slept well and woke rested each morning. I even liked waking up with a cold shower, though the darkness of the bathroom I would never find anything positive about.

Dressing in my room, my skin slowly warming from the cold water, cheering and clapping rose up from the reception office. Someone whistled high and loud through their teeth and then the suave sound of the dj on Radio Three FM filled the compound.

"Mauya!" the staff shouted. "Magates mauya!"

I flipped the switch on the wall and just like that, the power was back, here for now at least, the dim lamp on my nightstand glowing in the daylight.

CHAPTER 4. ZIMBABWE DOLLARS: PLEASE PAY BEARER ON DEMAND

At a used bookstand in the crowded flea market behind the Avondale shops, I entered the world's highest inflation economy. I climbed the concrete steps to an outdoor market on the top level of a parking ramp and scanned the rows of vendor stalls. Stall after stall was crowded with curios—carved hippos, wire sculptures, African animals in all sizes carved from semi-precious stones, and piles of knock-off American jeans. Shona soap stone sculptures in popular shapes like 'mother and child' and 'the lovers' lined the ground next to the vendors' tables and wood-carved masks lay stacked one on top of another in corners. I wasn't looking for gifts or African crafts, I'd have plenty of time for that in the remaining month or so I had there, and besides, everyone I knew already had a houseful of Zimbabwe handicrafts from my previous trips. Today, I was looking for someone I could trust to change my US dollars to Zimbabwe dollars and not rip me off.

"Hey, sister! Hey, sister!" people called from behind tables filled with brightly colored beaded sculptures and grass baskets woven into dizzying patterns.

"Nice things," they called to me. "Good price. Come and have a look!"

There were few customers and I knew many of the vendors needed a sale just to cover the cost of the day's bus fare. I could feel the desperation underneath the cheerfulness of their invites.

“Yes, they are beautiful,” I called back and kept walking. To pause was to be cornered.

At that time in late October 2007, Zimbabwe had an inflation rate of 15,000 percent and had officially joined the ranks of other hyperinflated economies like post-World War I Germany, Hungary after World War II, and Yugoslavia just before its dissolution in the mid-1990s. Growing exponentially in the hyperinflated environment, Zimbabwe’s inflation rate would later reach 89.7 sextillion percent, or 89.7×10^{21} percent in 2009 before the government finally abandoned the Zimbabwe dollar and replaced it with the more stable South Africa Rand and U.S. dollar. I had come back to Zimbabwe during this period of high inflation in an attempt to understand what abstract terms like ‘hyperinflation’ and ‘financial crisis’ meant in the daily lives of Zimbabweans. At home in the U.S. the last six years, I’d watched Zimbabwe’s inflation rate snowball. I’d read story after story of decimated savings accounts and monthly salaries that lost their value before the month was finished, but I did not know firsthand how Zimbabweans coped with these problems.

Once, nearly equal in value to the U.S. dollar in the early 1980s, the Zimbabwean dollar had become a laughable term, a synonym for ‘worthless.’ In 2007, the bills were being printed in larger and larger denominations to keep up with rising costs and had become collector’s items throughout the West. The week before I left to come back to Zimbabwe, I’d seen denominations of fifty thousand (50,000) and one hundred thousand (100,000) Zimbabwe dollars being sold on E-bay as novelties. The large numbers were abstract and

absurd, laughable, so long as you didn't think about the people who suffered under such disastrous economic conditions.

Though the money was a joke outside the country, in Zimbabwe it was the only legal form of currency allowed. I needed it to buy very real items like clean drinking water, tomatoes, and bus fare. But in Zimbabwe in 2007, it was unthinkable to change currency in a bank or other formal institution. No one, not even government officials, changed their money in banks. Money changing, like most everything else in the country at that time, happened on the parallel market—this shadow place on street corners, in the living rooms of houses, and in back rooms of offices where the fuel, bread, milk, and currency not available in sunlit shops could be had for a price. In 2007 in Zimbabwe, the black market was king. Eighty percent of the country's economic activity came from informal businesses—roadside vegetable vendors, home hair salons, and illegal money changers, like the ones I was looking for at the Avondale craft market.

Because the Zimbabwe government refused to devalue its currency, keeping it pegged at a ridiculously high value of \$Z30,000 to one \$1 U.S. dollar even as the black market rate crept steadily to \$Z800,000 to \$1 USD, it was unthinkable to change money at banks or bureaus of exchange. With a difference sometimes as much as 75 percent between black market and official rates, exchanging currency in official bureau de changes equivalent to throwing money in the sewer. Yet, even though going outside formal institutions brought a better rate or provided access to goods not available elsewhere, it also brought risk. How

would I know the best exchange rate when it changed daily and there was no accountable organization to regulate it?

On a tip from Mark, I'd come to the curio market in search of someone who could change my U.S. dollars into Zimbabwe dollars. I circled the vendor stands passing rows of masks carved from wood stained to look like ebony with a twenty US dollar bill tucked safely in my pocket. Herds of carved rhinos, giraffes, and elephants spread out on the concrete floor around the stands looked like a stampede. I scanned the faces of the vendors as quickly as their goods, searching for someone that, in that split second of judgment, I felt I could trust. Like much on this trip back to Zimbabwe, I relied on instinct.

At a used bookstand, two men with short dreadlock twists peeking from beneath their caps sat fiddling with the battery of an open cellphone. Worn hardcover copies of books with titles like *Rhodesia: Last Outpost of the British Empire* and *Cecil Rhodes: Race for Africa* were mixed in with books by contemporary Zimbabwean writers like Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chenjerai Hove. Banking on the assumption that anyone this dedicated to the history and culture of Zimbabwe was less likely to be a crook, I decided to begin my hunt for Zimbabwe's famously inflated dollars with the two guys at the used book stand.

In 1998, as an undergraduate student, I got sixteen Zimbabwe dollars for every one US dollar. I exchanged my slowly dwindling pile of \$20 and \$50 traveler's cheques at the glass and chrome American Express office in downtown Harare. A red LED board at the office's entrance announced the rate, but in the six months I was there, it only changed by two Zimbabwe dollars, inching from 14 to 16. From behind a glass window, a teller in a navy

uniform slid forms and finally Zim dollars to me through a metal drawer. For \$20 US dollars, I got a small pile of ten, twenty, and fifty Zimbabwean dollar notes, a few silver dollar coins, and my favorite, the thick gold Z\$2 coins with a picture of a scaly anteater called a pangolin on them. For \$20 US dollars, my pile amounted to roughly Z\$300 Zimbabwe dollars. I tucked it neatly into the zippered pocket of my travel purse.

By 2000, when I returned to spend the year in Zimbabwe to studying mbira, Zimbabwe had joined the international banking grid and I could withdraw local currency directly from my US bank account at ATMs all over the country. When I stuck my debit card with the Chicago skyline on it into a Standard Chartered ATM at the Karigamombe Center on Samora Machel Avenue in January 2000, I got 40 Zim dollars for every one US dollar. The machine whirred, blowing money-scented air on my face and spit out a stack of multi-colored Z\$100 bills with an image of balancing rocks on the front and Kariba dam in full churn on the back. For about \$100 US dollars I got \$4,000 Zimbabwe dollars. Eight months later, in August 2000, the same stack of Z\$4,000 only cost \$50 US, half of what it was in January. The old crinkled hundreds that sometimes smelled of wood smoke fire had become rare. By August, the bills were always crisp and brand new. They stuck together easily and when I counted them, I had to lick my thumb and forefinger and rub each bill individually to separate it from the others. Money queues snaked around city blocks and I often waited over a half hour, nervously hoping the machine wouldn't run out of cash before it was my turn. I was careful to withdraw all the money I would need on weekdays. By Saturday afternoon nearly all the ATMs in Harare sat empty, their screens blinking 'insufficient funds,' a pile of

receipts on the sidewalk next to the machine, their emptiness announced by the absence of a line.

The continual printing of new money that began in 2000 was the beginning of Zimbabwe's hyperinflation. The economic destabilization began with the drop in agriculture and industrial exports caused by the fast track land redistribution program. These industries generated the majority of the foreign currency Zimbabwe needed to pay its international debts and purchase essential goods and services like fuel and electricity. With a declining reserve of foreign currency, Zimbabwe could not pay neighboring countries like South Africa and Mozambique for electricity, nor could it purchase petrol and diesel from other oil-producing nations. Without the much needed foreign currency, the Zimbabwe government, in an effort to keep the country running, and continue to pay government workers, increased its production of local currency, printing more and more Zimbabwean dollars and driving the value of their money further and further down.

I stepped a few inches closer to where the two men with the dreadlock twists sat behind their table spread with used books. I looked from the books on the table to the two men. They had the battery out of the phone and were taking off the faceplate.

"May I help you?" the vendor in the black knit hat looked up and asked.

I froze and considered leaving. Francis, a Zimbabwean banker friend of mine, could change the money for me tomorrow. I could trust him and knew it was safe. But there were things I needed from the shops today.

“Where you from, sister?” the guy asked and crossed his legs on the chair. Next to him, the other vendor in the leather cap glanced up, said nothing, and went back to the dismantled phone.

“I’m from the U.S.,” I said, hoping he would hear from my accent that I really was American and not a spy sent by the government to bust illegal money traders.

“U.S.A.,” he said nodding. “It’s a beautiful country, hey?”

I shrugged. In Zimbabwe this was always a loaded question. Often the asker is really just reminding me of the opportunities I have that aren’t available to them. In a business set up, agreeing to anything positive about the US would surely cost me money. My white skin and foreign accent were already disadvantage enough. Both told everyone I met that I had money to spare, and given the economic imbalances between us, it was their right to get as much money from me as possible.

Moving a little closer to the guy in the black cap, I asked quietly if he knew anywhere I could change money.

He looked me up and down and paused before asking, “How much?”

“Twenty U.S.”

“I can do that,” he said. “I’ll give you eight per dollar.” Used to dealing with large figures, people just left the hundred thousand part off. Eight hundred thousand dollars became eight, and eight hundred and forty thousand dollars became eight point four.

This wasn't my first time changing money on the black market in Zimbabwe. By August 2001, during my last trip to Zimbabwe, no one with foreign currency changed money at banks or withdrew from ATMs anymore. For nearly a year the government had refused to devalue its currency, leaving it pegged ridiculously low at Z\$55 Zim dollars. Only those paid in Zim dollars used banks or ATMs, the rest of us, with forex, lived in a cash only market. I kept envelopes of US dollars hidden in the locked pocket of a suitcase I stored on the top shelf of my closet. I traded my US dollars in the back room of a dimly lit Indian shop on Kaguvi Street. The shop sold bolts of brightly colored polyester cloth, cellphone chargers, cheap pots and pans, and 50 kg bags of basmati rice. Inside, the shop smelled of mold and curry. The owner, a smiley man with a chest-length beard, white skull cap, and long white robe, would invite me to his office at the back of the shop. The room was small, full of receipts, cigarette ash, and from a locked drawer he took stacks of Zimbabwean dollars. He ran a counterfeit detecting light over the US bills I gave him, looking for the thin security strip. Instead of Z\$55, in this back office I got four hundred Zimbabwe dollars for every US dollar.

My visits to this shop marked the shift in Zimbabwe's economy from the official to the parallel, or black, market. The longer I stayed in 2001, the more things I bought outside the walls of formal stores. Gasoline hadn't been regularly available at gas stations since January 2000, but if you knew someone who knew someone, anything could be had. The few times I had a car, I filled it one 20 liter jerry can at a time from a guy who had access to a NGO's private drum. Prescription medications couldn't be counted on. Sometimes shops had what you needed, sometimes not, so I found myself filling mine through a friend who

regularly went to South Africa. I paid her in US dollars and American blockbuster DVDs. The black market built a web of interconnection. I had access to printer ink jet cartridges, others had a regular supply of imported leather shoes and handbags. We traded. Fresh lychees for basmati rice. Instead of shops, we bought and traded inside each other's homes.

In a black market economy, everything depended on who you knew. After six years away, I still had a handful of friends in Zimbabwe, but no real business connections. In October 2007, the Indian shop I had traded money at years ago, along with most of the other Indian-owned shops that had dotted the southwest part of downtown Harare were long gone, replaced by Chinese shops that sold the same mish-mash of silverware, cheap cloth, wigs and radios. Though Zimbabweans had resented the rough treatment they received from Indian shop owners, they now spoke wistfully of the Indians and disparaged the Chinese for the poor quality of their products. They openly mocked the sharp twanging tones of the Chinese language. I would have to rebuild my network from scratch.

In Iowa in 2007, preparing for my return trip to Zimbabwe, I didn't even think of using banks or ATMs for changing money because of the gap between black market and official exchange rates. I carried all the money I'd need for two months in cash with me to Zimbabwe, a thousand US dollars in small bills—tens, fives, and twenties tucked neatly into white bank envelopes stored in a locked pouch with my passport. At the backpacker's lodge where I stayed, I worried about the money being stolen, but I worried more about how I could change the money into Zim dollars so I could buy the things I needed.

"I'll give you eight hundred," the dreadlocked bookseller told me.

I still had no idea what a good exchange rate was. On the bus on the way up, I'd been offered five hundred by a money changer at a gas station, but had been advised by locals not to accept it. Eight was better than five, but I also knew that in negotiating cultures, you never accept the first price.

“How about nine?” I asked him.

“Nine?” His voice squeaked the word out high like I was physically hurting him.

“Where you trading that you get nine?” he asked, his brows pushing together, lips pursing. He was handsome in the casual way many Zimbabweans were—his dark skin clear, his features framed by high cheekbones, an awareness of his beauty worn lightly. I watched his face change quickly from friendly to suspicious in a few seconds.

“My friend who works at a bank in town told me he could change for me tomorrow at nine to one,” I lied, surprised at myself as the words came out.

“Today is not tomorrow,” he laughed. “I'll give you eight point four.”

His face switched back to a smile and he laughed at his own joke with his whole body. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed these negotiation games, both of us acting like a small discrepancy in price meant the world to us.

“All right,” I said, nodding. “Eight point four.”

He motioned me to come closer to the back of the bookstall, dug into a black leather satchel bag, and pulled out a stack of rubber-banded bills. He counted the crisp, red two

hundred thousand dollar notes out in groups of fives, each group a million Zim dollars, and then counted the piles of fives back to me.

“One, two, three,” he said, slapping million dollar stacks on the table.

“Sixteen,” he said, reaching the end of the million dollar piles and placed the thick wad, sixteen million, eight hundred thousand Zim dollars, in my hand. The stack of Zim dollars was about an inch and a half thick, hardly a wheelbarrow of money like the news stories that loved comparing Zimbabwe to Germany during World War II always said, but still, it was a hefty wad of cash to receive for one slim, green bill. 20 dollars versus 16.8 million. The difference was hard to grasp. I folded the stack of bills in half and jammed them into my front pants pocket and pulled my shirt down over the unsightly bulge.

“Maita basa,” I told the guy as I left. “Thank you for your work.”

“Aiwa,” he said and shook my hand in three-part Zimbabwean style shake—one regular full handshake, one clasp of each other’s thumbs, and then back to the regular handshake again, all in fast succession. I let his warm hand guide mine through the moves, slowly remembering.

Later, back in my room at the lodge, I looked at the bills the vendor had given me and saw they weren’t even exactly money, they were bearer checks. I spread the notes on the wax batik bedspread, separating piles by denominations. I made piles of ten thousand dollar notes, the smallest bill I had, and twenty, fifty, and a hundred thousand dollar notes, but the majority of the bills were brand new, crisp red 200,000 notes. The Z\$200,000 notes were red and off-white and contained no security strip as older, multi-colored Zimbabwe dollars had.

Three corners of the bill were marked with the number 200,000, the zeroes repeating from the left, right and bottom, as though repetition would make it seem normal. On the front was a chain of vaguely ‘African’ abstract shapes that circled around the words ‘bearer cheque’ at the center of the bill. Just below the words, Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, it said in small letters: ‘Please pay the bearer on demand’ and then the amount. Below the amount was the expiration date, 30 June 2008.

I squinted my eyes and reread the notes. “Please pay the bearer on demand two hundred thousand dollars on or before 30th June 2008.” On or before June 30th? I’d never seen money with an expiration date. I looked through my stacks, they all had expiration dates, and when I looked closer some of the bills in the smaller denominations had already expired. Was the money useless then?

I turned one of the two hundred thousand dollar notes over. The only concrete image on either side of the bill was the stark picture of five smokestacks releasing white clouds that trailed up into the sky on the back side of the note. The picture had a communist era feel, where bridges and power lines equaled progress, where bleak images on money bragged sadly, “Look, we have several tall buildings.” The president had shrewdly left his image and name off the new money. Only the head of the Reserve Bank, Gideon Gono, perhaps without a choice, signed his name in a small illegible scribble, translated in type below the signature on these growing denominations. I wondered if, as each new note was printed—first the ten thousand dollar note, then the twenty—did he assure himself that it would be surely be the largest note he printed, or did he even care?

The bearer cheques had been introduced in 2006 with the ‘Zero to Hero’ campaign that lopped three zeroes off Zimbabwe’s currency. All local currency had expiration dates and was printed in a single color scheme—green, red, or blue—against a cream background. The continual need for new larger and larger denominations had the Reserve Bank running thin on ink and images. Cascading water pouring over Victoria Falls and Kariba Dam were repeat favorites, as was an idyllic rural scene with two women pounding maize meal in a *duri*. These images appeared over and over as the new bearer cheque bills climbed in one year from single dollar denominations to two hundred thousand dollar bills.

The money spread out in piles on my bed felt like play money. There was no way to get my mind around a figure like sixteen million, four hundred thousand. I wrote the number on a piece of paper, unsure at first how many zeroes to write, counting them off on my hand. But still, even when the commas neatly separated the sixteen from the four hundred and gave the last three zeroes their own enclave, I couldn’t make the number mean anything. Arriving in any country, it always took time for the money to mean anything. That first currency exchange always left me feeling like I held a wad of play money. I hadn’t worked for the spread of multi-colored, oddly-sized bills suddenly in my hand. I didn’t know yet how many hours it would take to earn any of the notes I held, didn’t know how many bottles of beer or rides on the bus I could get with them. I didn’t yet understand what Marx noted as the shared symbolic value of a society’s currency, and without that, all I held was a wad of gaudy pictures. It takes time to understand the value of another’s economy, more time than one trip to the grocery store I’d made. With the five million dollars from Francis, I’d bumbled through the bills at the till, the cashier glaring through me the entire time. For a few bottles of

soda, my only choice since the TM had been out of drinking water, and two onions, I had paid four point two million dollars and accidentally gave the cashier two hundred thousand too much.

I gathered up the stacks of bills I'd separated and put them back into a wad in descending order, rewrapping the double rubber band around the bundle as the vendor had done. Before stuffing the money back in my bag, my eye caught the small print that read "Please pay bearer on demand" again. There was something desperate in that phrase—the 'please' implied the money could be refused. Full of pitiful good manners, it pleaded with shop owners and vendors for acceptance, all the while revealing that, despite signatures and smoke stacks and dams churning the wheels of progress, it was just a piece of paper, valuable only in mutually accepted symbolism.

Marx, recognizing the abstract, symbolic value of paper money, especially currencies no longer backed by a gold standard, saw paper money as imaginary commodities, shared fantasies that could, poof! one day be worthless. But he disagreed with people who said the value of money was imaginary or purely symbolic. He knew the very real effects money had on people's material lives, how the symbolic worth of currency determined the amount of beef or beans one ate or did not eat for dinner each night, or whether one worked sixty hours a week in a coal factory or thirty hours behind a long, wooden banker's desk.

Looking at my stacks of \$Z200,000 bills, unable to comprehend their worth, I agreed that paper money was shared fantasy, what could be more of a delusion than these numbers followed by zeroes and zeroes, but thinking of people in Zimbabwe up at four a.m. each

morning selling vegetables at roadside stands until sundown in hopes of earning a few of these bills, I knew money was an abstraction that mattered, even if it was a uni-color printed abstraction that politely asked everyone to believe in it.

CHAPTER 5. WATER

I put my hand mindlessly on the cool metal of the kitchen faucet and turned, expecting to hear the splash of water hit the metal bottom of the tea kettle. But nothing came out. The faucet hissed into the quiet of the empty kitchen, echoing off the tiled floor and walls. *Hss. Hss.* The pipes wheezed, as if racked with emphysema, spit a few drops of water into the open kettle and gasped. *Hss. Hss.* Somewhere far off, deep in the pipes, leftover water gurgled—throaty and congested. If only I could reach it.

It was my fifth morning in Waterfalls, a middle-class suburb south of Harare, Zimbabwe. After six years away, I was back in Zimbabwe and staying with a friend of a friend in a sprawling, empty house. Mark and Beaven, my new housemates, had gone to work and school and the gigantic house we shared was silent, vacant both of things and people. A sleek line of black granite countertop encircled the kitchen and highlighted bare gaps of white wall where a stove or refrigerator would go. The only appliances we had were a small television set and an electric two-plate that sat on a curved slot of countertop meant to be a breakfast nook. In the evenings, while eating, we sat in the kitchen on overturned 20 liter plastic jerry cans, leaning against the cabinets for back support, and watched the government channel, ZBC. We washed each of the three spoons and plates we had immediately after use, so they would be ready for the next meal.

Beaven, the older of the two brothers, wanting to put a good face forward, kept apologizing for the lack of furniture and dishes. "I haven't had time to collect things in town," he said and gestured to the long line of empty countertop snaking around the room. "Plates, dishes, those kind of things," he said and shook his head. He worked long hours at a bank in town. "I tried to send Mark," he said pointing to his younger brother who was chuckling, shoulders shaking, absorbed in a Nigerian Nollywood movie, "but he came home with nothing." Mark, an 18 year old university student, smiled and shrugged. "It's a bachelor flat," Mark said, a smile that hinted at the absurdity of he and his brother living like squatters in a gigantic, empty house played at his lips.

The owner of the house, Beaven and Mark's uncle, lived in Botswana and kept it more as a future holding than a home. Zimbabwe in 2007 was in the middle of an extreme political and economic crisis. Inflation was over 15,000 percent, the highest of any country in the world, there were fuel and food shortages, and the increasingly bankrupt government was unable to supply the country with adequate clean water and electricity. Over a third of Zimbabwe's population lived in exile, mostly in neighboring South Africa, Botswana, or the UK and United States. With the strength of the foreign currency Zimbabwe's expatriate community earned abroad, they were buying up land and houses, preparing for the triumphant return they would make one day. In Botswana, Beaven's uncle ran a thriving taxi business and had bought the house in Waterfalls a few months ago cheap from someone desperate to leave Zimbabwe. He installed Mark and Beaven, his most trustworthy relatives, to keep the house safe until he decided the time was right for him to return to Zim. But he didn't give them any furniture, dishes or appliances.

Waterfalls was full of houses like ours—glamorous, sprawling houses with terracotta tiled roofs, high security gates, and absentee owners. It was full of strange houses, many empty or half-built. Piles of bricks sat in front of the unfinished homes. Ten-foot-high gates went up around only the poured cement base of a house. Waterfalls was a neighborhood for Zimbabwe's new black middleclass, but that, like the neighborhood, was on hold, developing in fits and starts of abundance, misshapen. The homeowners sent money as they could from the UK, New York, and South Africa and the houses were built in wings, starting with a small concrete rectangle and added to in odd-shaped offshoots as money and the availability of building supplies allowed. Slowly metal-framed windows were put in the square gaps in concrete walls and corrugated roofs were shingled in green terracotta tiles stacked snugly like nesting bowls, one on top of the other.

Behind these sprawling, five-bedroom skeleton houses there was often a small, two-room shack that smelled of kerosene, where the poor relatives lived, guarding the 'big' houses for the owners abroad. The shack relatives planted gardens in the raw red-dirt where the front lawn would someday be and the women worked, bent over in these gardens, babies tied on their backs. Walking to catch the bus, I could hear them singing to their babies as they hoed weeds. On wires strung between the terracotta roofs of the big house and the corrugated zinc roofs of their homes, the shack relatives hung blankets, men's trousers, and neat rows of cloth *nappies* to dry. They made fires in the yard for cooking during the dry months and, in the afternoons, they sat at makeshift stands in front of small piles of deep red tomatoes, cooking greens, onions and shiny cellophane-wrapped single sweets for sale.

Our house in Waterfalls didn't have a two-room shack at the back. It was finished, but empty. The first time I visited to see if I would move there from the hostel where I'd been staying, it was night. Dim light from a bare bulb in the kitchen ceiling threw long shadows into the corners of the room. Beaven, still in his black pleated dress pants and white button up shirt from the bank, walked me through the empty rooms of the house. The hard soles of his dress shoes clacked against the ceramic tile floor. The sound bounced off the plaster walls and rang loudly behind us as we made our way down the narrow hallway lined with closed doors. One by one Beaven opened the doors and I stuck my head inside each room. "We don't really use this room," he said of two of the bedrooms, his voice echoing off tile and plaster. Besides a pile of exercise books and few pens where Mark studied, two of the four bedrooms were completely bare. Before I moved into the master bedroom at the end of the hallway, Mark and Beaven used only three rooms—the kitchen, one bathroom, and one bedroom—of the eleven rooms in the house. The dining room, living room, foyer, and three other bedrooms sat dark and completely empty.

In the quiet of the kitchen, I turned the gurgling faucet off and waited, hoping as I had with dead car batteries that one more crank, at just the right time, with the exact right force would make the pipes spark to life. Soft sunlight shone in through the southeast window and fell along the countertops in a stretched out rectangle, illuminating flecks of silver in the black granite. It was warm and peaceful in the kitchen and despite the obvious lack of water, I was still looking forward to sitting, cup of tea in hand, on the front stoop and waking slowly in the warmth of the sun.

I pushed the faucet handle toward the back wall as far as it would go, opening the tap all the way and waited. Hissing echoed up the pipes and rang against the metal basin of the sink. The sharp edge of the faucet handle dug into my palm, but I wouldn't let it go. Years of American indoor plumbing had conditioned me to expect a turned faucet to produce a stream of water. It was a matter of reflex—*turn, water, turn again, water stops*—anything different was hard to accept.

Deep in the plumbing, the leftover water bubbled thick and soggy. Warm hope rose in my chest and I jiggled the handle, trying to help the air catch and send a full stream of cool water pouring out. Instead, the more I jiggled and the longer the tap was open, the weaker the hissing became. The gurgle of water thickened like tar inside the pipes, and then stopped bubbling altogether. The hissing broke to softer and softer pants and then pipes were utterly silent.

I knew about the water shortages in Harare. Before coming back to Zimbabwe, I had read article after article that detailed the decline in the country's infrastructure. At that time, it was impossible to find any news story on Zimbabwe that didn't focus almost entirely on the breakdown of basic services like water, electricity, and building and road maintenance. But the gap between knowing and experiencing is vast. I knew this too, and it had been in hopes of closing that gap, even a little bit, that brought me back to Zimbabwe in 2007, at the height of the country's economic and political decline.

No matter how many articles on water shortages I'd read, standing in the sunlit kitchen still holding an empty tea kettle, I couldn't give up yet. I'd only been back in Zim

two weeks and hadn't yet developed the reflexes for this new country. When I had lived in Harare in 2000, electricity rationing had started in the black townships as the country ran out of foreign currency, but water shortages in even the poorest urban areas were unthinkable. In 2000, water was not only reliable, it was clean. As a foreigner, I could drink directly from the tap in any city in Zimbabwe. But in 2007, I had to be careful to boil all tap water. Reports warned that the government, no longer reliably able to afford the chemicals for treating waste water, often sent water back through the pipes filtered but untreated. In the two weeks since I'd been back, I got used to ordering drinks with no ice and after coming home thirsty enough times, I learned to remember to buy bottled water for drinking in town. Those changes I could make, but standing in a kitchen tiled elegantly in pale pink ceramic squares, a mile of black granite countertop encircling the room, it was hard to believe the stainless steel faucets were useless.

In Shona, people say those who have lost something will look again and again in the same place. Out of desperation, I pushed the hot water handle open, knowing it wouldn't work because we didn't have a hot water heater connected. The tap didn't even hiss. I thought of all the things I needed to do. I had an appointment in town in a few hours and I hadn't showered yet. How would I get ready? The skin on my face felt oily with last night's sleep and now that I couldn't, I was suddenly desperate to splash cold water on my face and rinse the film away. And what about my cup of tea on the sun warmed stoop?

With the kettle in hand, I walked down the long hallway to the bathroom in my room and tried the faucet on the bathroom sink. A thin trickle of leftover water dripped out and

rolled into the bottom of the kettle. Shrinking from a trickle, the tap dripped for a minute, beads of water hanging longer and longer at its lip with each drop, and then stopped completely. I took a deep breath. I knew what I needed to do, but the gap between knowing and doing was as large as the changes Zimbabwe had undergone in the six years since I'd been here.

On my first day back in Zim, after an 18-hour bus ride up from Johannesburg, I arrived at my hostel exhausted and thirsty, only to find the entire neighborhood was in the middle of a week-long power outage. My head was groggy from the poor night's sleep on the bus. Since we'd crossed the Zimbabwe border eight hours before, I'd been fantasizing about emerging from the shower at the hostel cool and clean, putting on fresh clothes and sitting down to a cold bottle of Castle lager. Standing at the reception desk, my bags dropped haphazardly on the floor beside me, the receptionist, a thin young man with a shy smile, explained the rates and rules, and then said sheepishly, "Also, you should know we have no power." It was the middle of the afternoon and light came in through the open windows. I hadn't noticed the darkness in the office behind him. I was too tired to go anywhere else. I nodded and adjusted my expectations. For three days, I read by flashlight and cooked with the gas stove in the kitchen, wondering when, if ever, the power would come back. Though I never asked, whenever the staff at the hostel saw me they always said, "The power should be back on anytime from now, anytime." Their voices rose at the repetition of 'anytime' and they shuffled quickly away, as if to avoid answering questions. But I didn't have any questions. The power was off and that was that. Then, late morning on my third day, as I stood in the dark shower stall, cold water pouring over me, the lights came back on. From the

bathroom, I heard the staff in the kitchen shouting and cheering and then the stereo kicked on, high *jiti* guitars echoing off the brick in the courtyard.

I needed my expectations to switch like they had when I'd checked in at the hostel. My body and mind had registered the change at the same time. I felt confused at first, resistant—what would not having electricity mean?—and then, because I was too tired to fight or even comprehend it, I just accepted my new, changed reality. But water was harder for me to give up on than electricity. Water was vital, electricity was not. With a thin, failing hope, I tried the taps in the kitchen again, just in case. This time they didn't even hiss. In the emptiness of the house, it was almost easier to believe the pipes, like in a brand new house, weren't connected to anything.

Though I knew about water shortages, I didn't know how people lived in urban areas without running water. Obviously they were, but how? Like a person who has lost something in the Shona saying, I checked and rechecked the taps. I went into Mark and Beaven's bathroom last, feeling like I was violating their private space. Turning on the light that thankfully still worked, I saw a large blue plastic tub, the kind used here for hand-washing laundry, sitting by the side of Mark and Beaven's bathtub filled half-way with water. Pieces of grass floated on top of the water in the blue tub, and even in the dark of the blue plastic I could tell the water was murky. Beads of water sat raised and shining along the bathtub floor. Mark and Beaven had obviously bathed somehow before they left, most likely with the murky water in the blue tub.

Just thinking about bathing made my face feel oily. I slid the back of my palm along the sheen on my forehead and rubbed at the dried sleep still in the inside corners of my eyes. I fantasized about immersing myself in a warm, full bath.

When I'd come to look at the house, Beaven showed me the bedroom at the very end of the long hallway last. "This would be your room," he said stepping into the middle of the gigantic master bedroom. Windows that reached nearly from the floor to the ceiling lined the two exterior walls, letting the dark night in and making the room feel even larger. I remember thinking, "I could roller-skate in here," and knowing, even at the time, what a ridiculous comparison that was. A mattress and a pile of blankets on the floor in the corner were the only objects that broke the open tile of my roller rink. I had lived in entire apartments smaller than this one room.

With our shoes echoing on the tile, Beaven led me around a corner I hadn't even noticed. "And this would be your bathroom," he said, turning the light on. There was a vanity with drawers and an oval mirror, a toilet, and a long, full-length bathtub, the kind I could stretch all the way out in, my neck to my toes fully immersed in water. Thinking of myself soaking leisurely, rinsing away the red dust of the city and cooling my skin after a day in the sun, I decided to rent the room. The first morning there, when I turned the tap to run my morning bath and only cold water came out, my fantasy shattered. Baths in Zimbabwe were for getting clean, not lounging. Just one more thing in the long list of all I had forgotten in my six years away. And hot water heaters, or geysers as they're called, were low on the list of purchase priorities, certainly coming after a refrigerator, which we also did not have.

I looked at the murky water in the blue plastic tub in Mark and Beaven's bathroom. It was either this water or nothing, I thought, and half-carried, half-dragged the blue tub down the long hallway toward my bathroom. With each step, my flip-flops slapped against the tile floor and echoed, *pat, pat*, against the bare walls. In Shona they called flip-flops *mapatapat* for the noise they made slapping and sucking against the bottoms of your feet. Dragging the tub down the hallway, I heard the noise of my sandals not as *flip, flop*, but *pat, pat*.

Getting the blue tub to my bathroom, I bent over it and brought the brown water straight to my face in cupped hands and rubbed it over my oily face. I brought the water to my face again and again, holding the water to my face as long as I could before it dripped through my fingers, feeling my tension fade with each rinse. I felt guilty about using Mark and Beaven's water, but I couldn't think of any other option. If our water was out, I was sure the whole neighbor was out too and besides, until I had a bath, I couldn't even go to the store to get drinking water.

In my bedroom, I undressed for a bath, steeling myself for that first immersion in the cold, murky water. I stood one leg in and one leg out of my pajama bottoms, when my eye caught the glint of the metal bucket in the garden. Through the tall bedroom windows, I looked out at the bucket sitting next to the well. I had watched Mark water the backyard garden with the water from this well. He hauled bucket after bucket full of water up from the well and poured it at the base of the kale stalks. He lowered the metal bucket down the well, holding onto the black electrical wire used as a rope. Metal clanged against the concrete shaft as he lowered it down. The muscles in his thin arms jumped as he lifted the full bucket back

up, water sloshing. He poured bucket after bucket again and again onto the sugarcane, and again onto the chard. The dry red earth of the garden became a deep, brown red mud. It took him nearly a half hour to water a 4' by 12' plot. Watching Mark water the garden, I had kept thinking how little time it would have taken him with a hose, if there had been one.

In my room, looking at the long black cord of electrical wire tied around the bucket handle for a handle, it clicked. Of course. The well's role was more vital than just maintaining the garden. I put my clothes back on and went out to the backyard, my *mapatapats* slapping down the hallway. I lowered bucket after bucket down the deep well and poured the red-gray water into the blue tub. At least now I knew I wasn't using Mark and Beaven's last remaining tub of water.

When the bucket hit the water table, it tipped on its side and slowly filled with water. When it was full, it sank below the surface and I heaved it back up, hand over hand on the narrow cord, thinking how heavy the water we need for daily life is. I drag-carried the half-full blue tub back into the house and into my bathroom. Even half-full there was 15 or 20 gallons of water, nearly 100 pounds, and I could barely lift it. Murky water sloshed onto the tile floor as I navigated the long hallway. A swerving trail of muddy sandaled footprints led down the hall to my room. I dumped the well water into the porcelain tub.

After a few mornings of quick, cold baths, I'd gotten used to dousing myself, soaping up, and getting out, my cool skin slowly warming as I dressed. I had learned it was better to go fast, to emerge myself immediately and get it over with. I stepped my foot in first, letting the chill from the water run up my leg to my chest. I winced. If I couldn't quite arrive at

acceptance, at least I could get to resignation. A few blades of grass swirled in the waves my feet had created. I psyched myself up for the plunge.

This was not what I had in mind when I first saw the tub. I had bathed in lakes and rivers and been without running water for long periods of time, but it was always in the wilderness or a rural village. It made sense there to pour water from a creek or from a faraway well over my body. I could see the trees and smell the freshness of the air as I bathed. In the bush, I enjoyed joining my cleanliness with the woods by washing with water that contained the soil. It made sense there to pour water dirty with my dead skin cells and oil back to the soil where it came from, it created a connection between me and the land where I was. But here, surrounded by pink ceramic tile, porcelain fixtures, and the shrill sound of the neighbor woman disciplining her children coming in through the open window, it felt like failure, an inconvenience due to someone else's lack of responsibility.

One, two, three, I counted and sat down, holding my breath. Used to it or not, the initial shock never dulled. My body tensed to the cold, muscles clenched as though that would keep me warm. My movements stirred up the sediment in the well water and before I even soaped up the bath had turned a dull, red-grey. With a washcloth, I scrubbed my goose-pimpled skin, doused myself one more time and I stepped out of the tub. Even after toweling off, my skin was still covered in goosebumps, but I felt pink and fresh.

That time the water stayed off for nearly a week. We bathed in well water, boiled it to drink and cook, poured it with buckets into the porcelain basins of our toilets and flushed. We were forever back and forth from the well filling the blue tubs and dragging them back

into the house, the dirt and rocks at the bottom of the tubs scraping against the pink ceramic tiles and scratching up the granite countertops. We kept the bathtubs plugged and the taps open at all the times in case the water came back on, even for a few minutes. The rumor was that sometimes workers at the water company felt sorry for an area that had been without water for a long time and turned the taps back on briefly, usually deep in the night. A few times in the mornings, I found a couple inches of fresh water in the tub in my bathroom and happily used it to bathe in instead of well water.

Another morning, I found the kitchen counter lined with a row of bottles filled with tap water. I can only assume the water had been back on while I slept and Mark or Beaven had filled the bottles. I remembered the mismatched jumble of glass and plastic bottles I'd seen by the sink the first night I'd visited before I lived there. I had wondered why they were all piled there in the otherwise sparse room. Another piece of the puzzle that suddenly made sense. My time in Zim was like that—like the piles of bottles or the backyard well I barely noticed at first suddenly coming sharply into focus as its purpose became clear to me.

After our water went out, I began noticing that ads for boreholes dominated the classified sections in Zimbabwean papers. As I asked around, I learned that everyone in Zimbabwe who had the space and could afford it had both a borehole for water outages and a diesel generator for electricity outages. The country was essentially running itself. I thought of the taps back home and how easily we went to them, flicking on hot or cold water, fiddling with them to get the exact perfect temperature. I thought of the long showers I took, shaving my legs and letting the conditioner sit on my hair. In my room in the quiet mornings, when I

listed in my head things I was grateful for, I looked at the bucket sitting by the well and was thankful we had the land to drill a borehole. I thought often of the people in the townships who went months with only a small trickle at 3 am. The houses there were so tightly packed, they didn't have the option of digging a well. During the water outages, I promised I would never take running water for granted again, but even in Waterfalls when the water was back on for a few days in a row, I began to forget the weight of those blue buckets.

One night when the water was out again, I woke up to the unmistakable sound of water running through pipes. I had become hyper-aware of this sound, always listening for it in the back of my mind even in sleep. The pipes sputter as the water starts, coughing at first as air is blown from the stagnant tubes. Then there is the sound of splashing, water hitting the porcelain of the sink or tub. When I heard the first sputtering coughs, I sat up in the dark room and craned my ear toward the bathroom. The tank of the toilet hissed as it filled and the hollow sound of water on porcelain echoed in the emptiness of the silent house.

Usually a slow waker, I sprang from bed with an urgent panic and joy. The water had come! I ran around the house, making sure both bathtubs were plugged and that the taps in all the sinks were open. I watched the clear water pool and rise against the sides of the tub in my room and stuck my hand in, swishing it around. In the quiet of the kitchen at night, I filled all the empty buckets and bottles with the cool water running from the sink faucet. I kept glancing over my shoulder thinking Mark or Beaven would hear all the clinking and wake up, but no one came from their closed bedroom door. From my place at the kitchen sink, I saw the lights on in the neighbor's house and heard the thud of buckets heavy with water

hitting their floor. The whole neighborhood must have been up collecting water as I was. I wondered about the relatives who lived in the shacks behind the half-built houses. Were they up too? Did it even make a difference in their lives whether the water was on or not?

When I'd filled every container we owned, even the large cooking pot and the 20 liter jerry can Mark used for a chair, I lined the bottles and jugs along the black granite countertop, trying to be careful not to scratch the stone as I slid the heavy jugs in place. I thought of the ceramic tiles in every room of the house and how we had been dragging buckets of water over and over them. Surely when the house was built, the original owners never imagined it would be used in this way.

I filled the last of the water containers, the manic feeling of water gathering wearing off, and I began to feel exhausted. I'd been dashing, filling tubs and buckets for almost two hours. What if, like most Zimbabweans, I then had to wake up and get ready for a full day of work? A deep weariness set in. The municipality couldn't be trusted to treat the water properly. Most likely the water wasn't safe to drink. In the morning, I would have to boil jug after jug of the water for drinking. At 4:30, with both bathtubs full, I closed the taps and went back to bed. Lying on my mattress on the floor, I wondered if when I woke up in the morning the water would be off again, making my efforts worthwhile. Or, maybe when I turned the tap in my bathroom sink in the morning light, clear, cool water would run out and my collection of jugs, tubs, and bottles would have been in vain.

That was the most difficult part, the not knowing. Not knowing if the water you collected was needed, if the owner of the house would one day come home and kick you out,

if someone would send the money from abroad to buy more bricks, if the magic switch we all hoped existed for Zimbabwe would flip one night while we slept, and when we woke in the morning, everything would be normal again—the clear hiss of the toilet basin filling, the inflation halted, those in exile pouring back into the country freely, like water from a tap.

CHAPTER 6. IN MAZOWE

At a clearing in the bush, near a black metal sign that read, ‘Tatagura’ in wobbly white hand-painted letters, the train slowed first to a chug, then stopped with an air brake jerk. I looked for Terrance, the young man with small dreadlock twists peeking from his cap that Peter had sent to escort me. Terrance was tall, with deep brown skin and eyes that changed emotions quickly. He was probably 18 or 20, and had maintained a cool distance ever since he met me on the platform at Harare Station that afternoon. My friend Peter had sent Terrance to escort me from Harare to a small farming village in the Mazowe district. Peter worked in the village, buying gold the villagers mined from the riverbeds and from the land they used to farm when they were laborers and the land was a white-owned commercial farm. Like much of the commercial farmland in Zimbabwe, the farm I was going to see was redistributed in the early 2000s during the government’s controversial ‘fast track’ land reform program where, within a few years, over 8 million hectares of white-owned commercial farmland were given, often without formal title deeds or access to agricultural inputs, to indigenous Zimbabweans. Peter, though he didn’t expressly say so, had invited me out to Mazowe so that I could see firsthand the complicated reality of life on a redistributed farm.

From the outside platform at the back of our train car I had watched the Mashonaland bush roll by in a dense tangle of msasa and acacia trees choked from the waist down by thickets of buffalo thorn and caper bushes. The tiny pink and yellow flowers of wild lantana were woven like bright polka dots through the green and brown bush and tall, yellowed

spears of elephant grass grew up close on either side of the tracks, their dry stalks revealing the harshness and length of the dry season that was soon coming to an end. Many times during that afternoon's trip from Harare, I could have stuck my hand out the open windows of the train car and touched the thin, tangled branches of the bush without leaving my seat. I could have, but didn't. Mostly, I had passed the slow hours of the train's stops and starts out on the platform in the dry warmth of the bush air, watching the deep blue sheet of sky billowing from the edges of the horizon, relishing that I was in one of the few places left where I could still ride outside in the open air on a moving train.

When the train came to a stop, I was still out on the platform and caught Terrance's eye through the window to see if this was our stop. He was standing up inside the train car, pulling my grey backpack quickly onto his shoulder. He nodded and I rushed back inside, grabbing my plastic grocery bags packed with rice, milk, and two jugs of drinking water. The other passengers were up, slinging bags and sleeping children, pushing in a sudden frenzy toward the back platform exit. The car was hot, despite the open windows, and smelled strongly of cheap floral perfumes, Vaseline, and the powdery, granular scent of ground maize meal. We crammed ourselves urgently toward the narrow exit door as though the greater frenzy we displayed increased our chances of successfully getting off the train. Sharp elbows dug in my sides, canvas duffel bags bumped against my back and 20 kg sacks of rice and mealie meal bit at my heels. My head was thrust into the damp, ripe underarm of an old man and, though there was no way to go any faster, the people behind me kept pushing as though

their lives were in the balance. That was how things worked here—95 percent of life lulled past like waves of heat, but the other 5 percent was frantic.

On paper, the fast track land reform was supposed to correct injustices that remained from the colonial era. In 2000, twenty years after Zimbabwe's independence, white Zimbabweans still owned 70 percent of the country's most arable land though they made up only 1 percent of Zimbabwe's 3 million people. Balance was needed. But the ethnic and political violence that characterized the change of landownership under the fast track program, and the economic plunge Zimbabwe took in its aftermath, made it hard for people inside and outside the country to see the new order as improvement. Eight million hectares, mostly in 6 hectare plots, had been given to the people, but without the security of formal ownership or guaranteed access to seed, fertilizer, or tractors, most new landowners had little incentive, or means, to invest in their new land. And keeping those plots often required attending the ruling party rallies, ululating in a field somewhere, dancing and shouting, "Pamberi neZANU!"—"Forward with ZANU!" and "Pasi nevatengesi!"—"Down with sellouts!" while ZANU(PF) members threw bags of fertilizer off the back of their Toyota HiLux twin cab trucks. Meanwhile, the fertile, red-brown earth sat idle, growing thicker and thicker patches of elephant grass.

From behind people pushed me with their hips and duffel bags face first into Terrance's back. My cheek rubbed the front pocket of my backpack on his shoulder and grazed the cool, smooth surface of the goat horn snuff container through the mesh. The horn had been a gift from Peter in 2000, when I'd spent a year studying the *mbira*, a Shona

instrument, with him. The black horn was about the length of my palm, and was carved with a series of telescoping white rings that narrowed toward the tip and ended with a tiny stopper that plugged the hole for the snuff. In Shona, certain types of snuff were used as a means of prayer and to maintain connection to the ancestors. As an instrument used to communicate with the ancestors, mbira players often took snuff while they played, passing their *nhekwes*, as the spiritual containers were called, around, pinching off mounds of dark brown ground tobacco and herbs, bringing it first to one nostril, then to the next, and breathing it in.

On the train car platform at Tatagura, Terrance looked at me and said in the little English he had, “We jump now.” The other passengers, old women in long skirts, men in faded dress trousers, and young men dressed in baggy American hip-hop style clothes, threw their bags to the ground and leapt the few feet from the train car stairway to the dirt clearing. On the metal stairs, I hesitated, afraid to jump. An old woman in a skirt and head wrap pushed past me, vaulting the few feet of air easily. Terrance, on the ground already, grabbed my arm tightly and helped me down. With his firm grip, I leapt, my feet hitting the dirt and raising a cloud of red dust. The shock of the impact ran up my legs and sent a wave of pressure through my knees. Before I could straighten my back all the way up, the train was already off, the faces in the open windows of the train cars sliding past, heading further north around the curve of the earth to the coal mining town of Bindura.

In the busy downtown Harare office Peter had on the sixth story of a glass and steel building in early 2000, we’d meet two or three times a week and go over mbira songs. Bar after bar, we followed the twisting patterns of the melodies across the instrument’s 24 metal

keys with our thumbs. When I arrived in January 2000 to continue the mbira study I'd started with Peter two years ago on an undergraduate study abroad program, the industrial supply business he and his wife, Angeline, ran was booming. We squeezed our lessons in between phone calls and meetings and often I came to the office to find even the reception area piled high with coveralls, gumboots, and helmets awaiting delivery. In the free moments, we sat across a giant mahogany desk from one another, the wooden bases that held the metal keys of our mbiras placed on the desk for increased resonance. At times when I played well and the separate parts of a song joined together, and also when I struggled with learning new parts, Peter often stopped, pulled his nhekwe from the pocket of his dress pants, and pounded a small mound of dark brown snuff into his palm.

“Mek I lick my snuff?” he would say in Rastafarian patios before pinching off half the pile between his thumb and middle finger. His knit cap, bursting with a decade's worth of dreadlocks, bobbed as he bent his head and gazed down at his palm. He leaned back, bringing the snuff first to his left nostril, breathing the dark mound in. Bringing the remaining snuff to his right nostril and breathing it in, he dusted his nose and palms off.

“Give thanks,” he would say, pocketing the snuff container and placing the mbira back against the desk. Sometimes after a pinch of snuff he would forget me entirely and play and play, the song moving in circles, expanding from a simple four bar center, repeating and changing as he weaved in and out of versions and improvisations. With each strike of his thumbs, the metal keys—especially the fat, low notes—vibrated loudly, their tinny sound amplified against the mahogany. He would close his eyes and lean back in the office chair,

not needing as I did, to watch the keyboard. His thumbs skated across the keys, a blur of movement out which rose the tender, melancholy harmonies of songs like Nhemamussa, Nyamaropa, Mahororo.

In the clearing of bush that served as the Tatagura train station, men stood in the shade of gum trees talking and women waited for their arrivals seated, legs stretched out in front of them on pieces of brightly colored cloth. Terrance rushed ahead and was greeted by shouts and the sharp crack of high fives from a group of three other young guys all with the same small dreadlock twists poking from beneath their caps. I scanned the crowd, finally spotting Peter standing at the very back of the clearing, off by himself, leaning coolly against a tree. He was thinner than before and his dreadlocks were in a blue hat extending straight up from the top of his head, changing his silhouette from the loose circle made by the knit berets he used to wear.

I was suddenly afraid to see Peter again after all these years. I was afraid I would see the hardship of life in Zimbabwe over the past six years on his face, that the food shortages, inflation, the stress of caring for his wife and three kids, and the starting and folding of both his industrial supply company and a grocery store would have grayed his hair, marked his face with lines, or worse, sapped the watchful curiosity from his eyes. Over the years, we'd kept in touch through periodic phone calls or emails, but often six months or more would go by between contact. I knew the main events of his life, his mother's death two years ago, his son's entrance to elementary school, that he'd been given land for his grocery store that had later been taken back, but there was so much that couldn't be shared across a crackling phone

line. I'd known Peter for ten years, and as the only friend from Zim I'd been able to maintain consistent contact with, Peter was Zimbabwe to me. Alone in Mazowe and faced after so long with each other again as real people, I was afraid we might find the distance and difference in our lives insurmountable.

In 2000, a few months into our lessons, Peter pulled a black goat horn *nhekwe* out of his pocket and slid it across the desk to me. I had often shared snuff with him during lessons, pounding out the tiniest circle, smaller than a dime, and slowly pinching pill sized piles into my burning nostrils. Its earthy flavor ran like acrid soil all the way down the back of my throat. It took four or five pinches for me to empty my palm and sometimes I sneezed, my eyes tearing up, but I liked the increased focus I got afterward and I liked taking part in the ritual.

The *nhekwe* Peter handed to me was black, nearly identical to his. I took it thinking he was offering snuff.

“For the *gwenyambira*,” he said looking me in the eyes to make sure I understood.

I tried to refuse at first, shaking my head. *Gwenyambira* was a title given only to players accomplished enough to perform at a *bira* ceremony where they played for hours, not stopping until their songs had successfully called the ancestors back from the spirit world. Even after a year of lessons, I was no *gwenyambira*, but I understood the *nhekwe* as an offer of gratitude and trust, a token that meant I could be trusted with the sacred parts of Shona culture. I cupped my hands and clapped them together in the traditional way of a Shona

woman, the air trapped between my palms pushing out with each clap and making a hollow, echoing thump that bounced off the office's plaster walls.

“Mazvaita,” I said. *Thank you*, and pounded a tiny circle of snuff into my palm before passing it back to share with Peter.

When I left Zimbabwe the following January in 2001, Peter refilled my nhekwe with snuff made specifically for ritual and prayer purposes. The fast track land reform was in full swing and had all but stopped business in Zimbabwe. Without industry to supply, Peter and Angeline had closed their downtown offices and we met instead at my apartment just near the Harare Gardens.

“For your travels,” Peter said, dipping the horn into the brown paper package of snuff, stamping the contents down, and refilling it until the nhekwe was packed tightly. “When you travel, take it with for good luck.”

During the six years I'd been away from Zimbabwe, I brought the nhekwe with me on every flight or long car drive I'd taken. The snuff inside was long gone. Some I had taken during prayer or meditation, others had simply spilled out when the stopper opened accidentally inside my bag. I was looking forward to sitting across from Peter again, taking the nhekwe from my bag, and asking him for a refill.

Still leaning against the tree, Peter reached in his pocket and pounded a thimble of dark brown snuff into his palm. I knew he'd seen that I'd spotted him, but he made no movement toward me. He brought the snuff to his nose in two quick pinches and I saw that

he was nervous to see me again too. It put me at ease and reminded me why we were friends. Of course he would stand back by the tree and insure himself a few hundred feet to get a read on me before we met. I would do exactly the same thing. We were both observers, both lived simultaneously inside and outside of our lives—that was what connected us initially across the differences in our cultures and kept our friendship alive through years with little contact. As his student, he had often teased me, saying, ‘What are you, a reporter?’ when I’d asked too many questions. We’d laugh knowing his questions for me were just as numerous and that it was the questions themselves, the examination of our lives and cultures that answering them required, that was the cornerstone of our friendship.

Hefting up the grocery bags, I waved and walked toward the tree he was standing under.

“Ndazvoka,” I said when I was close enough for him to hear. I’d been waiting to say this. I loved the drama of announcing myself in the Shona way, calling out, “I have arrived.” I realized I’d been saying it over and over in my mind during the years I’d been away, imagining myself returning.

His face softened into a smile. I took his outstretched hand and shook it in the three shake Zimbabwean style, clasping his whole palm first like a Western handshake, then clasping only the thumbs, and back to the palm, all in quick succession.

“Wadzoka here?” he asked—*You have arrived?*—raising his eyebrows and glancing around at the bush to either side of the clearing. This was the traditional Shona response, part

of the back and forth of greetings, but his play on it, and the absurdity of me hopping off the train at a whistle stop in the bush called Tatagura, made us both crack up. Laughing, he bent over, and slapped his knee. I watched his face as he laughed. There were no deep lines or signs of weariness. There wasn't even a single twist of gray in the hair around his face outside his tall hat, though he must have been in his late thirties then.

“Terrance!” he called, his low voice rumbling instructions in Shona to the group of young guys. They ran over, greeted me and took the bags I was holding, disappearing down a red dirt path that wound through a field of elephant grass taller than they were.

We followed behind them, walking the well-worn path toward the village at Peter's slow and steady pace.

Our conversation kept pace with our step. We asked after each other's families and, though he'd never met them, Peter asked in the way most Zimbabweans do, after the health of my parents. He told me his twin daughters were fourteen now and doing their “O” levels, his wife, Angeline, was fine, and their son, who I'd only met as a tiny baby, was now in grade one. His eyes sparkled when he talked about his son.

“Tafara is very naughty,” he said. ‘Naughty’ was a compliment in Zim, it meant strong-willed, full of life, not bad or devious, and I knew Peter contrasted it with earlier generations of Zimbabwean children who did not speak to adults unless spoken to. I knew he also contrasted it with his own generation that grew up under Rhodesian rule.

He told me his family had a house in Harare they were paying off thanks to being bumped ahead in a ruling party queue.

“So, I work here for a week, two weeks,” he said. “Whatever it takes, then I go back to Harare.”

I was dying to ask questions about his work but knew we would get to it eventually.

Walking slightly behind Peter on the narrow trail—African footpaths were never wide enough to walk side by side—I wondered how far it was to the village from the train. The hot dry air dusted my arms and legs with a thin layer of red earth. The sky had faded to a pale late afternoon blue that melted into the small tufts of white clouds. I tugged my hat lower over my eyes, thinking about the two gallons of drinking water I had for the next two days.

Gesturing to the thick, yellow stalks of elephant grass pushing in on either side of the path, Peter said, “This whole field used to be maize.”

The grass was so tall and thick in spots I could only see the sky and the narrow red earth line of the path. It was hard to imagine anything else ever here but grassland.

“See how high that tree is?” Peter asked, pointing to a small scrub tree growing waste-high among the grass.

“That’s how you know no crops have grown here for five years,” he said.

He pointed again at the tree, its gnarled trunk dwarfed in a field of elephant grass. “The grass can grow in a season,” he said, “but the trees, they mark the years.”

I looked for signs of the farm that used to be here and found a few rows of raised ridges to the side of the path. Where the grass was thinner and the other bush plants had a chance to spread out, a few dried maize cobs lay, bleached by the sun, disintegrating into the soil.

“You see that wire?” Peter asked and I looked up at a long black line of electrical wire extending to the eastern horizon. I hadn’t even seen it. There was so much my foreign eyes missed or misinterpreted.

“You can follow it to the big house.”

“Who lives there now?” I asked. I hadn’t even thought about what happened to the farmer’s house when the land was redistributed. Surely everyone would want to live there.

“It’s run down now,” he said, “But the electricity still goes to three houses. The big house and two small cottages nearby.”

He laughed cynically. “Everyone thought once the land was theirs they were going to live like the whites they’d seen all their lives in the big house.” He laughed again. “You’ll see,” he said. “The war vets fought over the farmer’s house, one of the higher ups got it, and the old farm managers got the cottages.”

Every few hundred feet there was a hole in the ground about mid-calf deep, a little wider than a basketball, and ringed with the black ash. I searched for signs of the gold mines this area had become famous for, and asked Peter about the burnt edged holes I saw in ground.

“No,” he said, “That’s just a place for burning garbage. I will show you the mines tomorrow.”

The grass thinned and opened to a red earth clearing where two long rows of about 30 round, thatched roof huts stood. The dried earthen stucco of the houses were all painted the same shade of cream and their roofs were a sallow brown, woven from long dried stalks of elephant grass. The pale colors matched the dry, muted landscape. From closer up, I saw the thatch on most roofs was brittle, sun-faded, and full of holes and the stucco was peeling off the houses in large chunks, exposing sun-baked bricks the same color as the rust brown soil.

The dry heat and silence of the village sapped my energy. My spirits sank. The bare, sun-baked surface of the red-orange earth stretched between the faded cream and thatch houses like a dry, dusty carpet. Where were the banana and mango trees I had seen at every other rural Zimbabwean home I’d visited? Where was the patch of cooking greens that every Zimbabwean, even those who lived in town, had in their yards? The only green I could see was the ring of bush that grew up around the clearing of village.

An old man waved from his seat in the rim of shade outside a house, and a woman at the water pump in the center of the village stopped mid-pump and raised her hand to us

without speaking. Besides those two people, the village felt as though someone had pressed ‘pause’ and at any moment might press ‘play’ again, springing the hot, sleepy world back to life. I knew the village was expecting me and, walking down the midway between the two rows of houses, I felt the burn of eyes on me that I could not see. Peter had had to get approval at an all village meeting for my visit. The people were suspicious.

“An American? What does she want to see here,” they’d asked. “Is she a reporter?”

When Peter explained he’d been my friend for ten years and that I had studied mbira with him, they finally agreed.

“I’m an outsider here, too,” he told me. “I’ve been coming here for almost two years, but they are only now accepting me.”

Toward the end of the line of houses, Peter pulled out a key, ducked down under the thatch overhang and unlocked a wooden door. “Come on,” he said, smiling and “I’ll show you my house.”

That evening people from the village kept dropping by Peter’s house, making up any excuse they could think of to come in and witness the murungu, *white person*, staying in a hut in Tatagura. A group of elementary school girls hung around the door giggling, daring one another to shout, “How are you?” in their exaggerated nasal imitation of English voices.

“Ouh-are-ou?” they called, losing the ‘h’ as they forced the words through their noses.

“Fine,” I shouted through the open door. “How are you?” and they ran away howling with laughter.

Sometimes one brave girl would call back as she ran, “I am fine!” in the stiff, rote way they repeated these phrases at school.

Old women and men knocked at the door, saying, “Gogogoi” in the Shona imitation of the sound of knuckles rapping a wooden door.

“Pindai!” Peter called, looking at me each time a knock came at his door.

In the cooking hut adjacent to the house, Terrance boiled a fresh pot of *sadza*, a maize meal porridge cooked until stiff enough to grab with your hands, roll into a ball, and dip it into sauce and vegetables. The smoke from the fire and the coarse grind of the mealie meal made the *sadza* delicious. I tore off chunk and after chunk of it and dipped it into the bean and tomato sauce stew.

“You’ve really taught Terrance to cook,” I told Peter, laughing. “But still, it doesn’t beat Angeline’s cooking.”

As Rastafarians, Peter and Angeline were vegetarians. I loved eating at their house because Angeline always prepared healthy, delicious food—a welcome alternative to the over-salted chicken and greens swimming in oil most Zimbabweans loved.

“When I go back to Harare, I always put on weight,” Peter said.

“I noticed you were slimmer,” I told him. I was careful saying it because in Zimbabwe being slim was often associated with poverty or illness. If someone was too thin people often suspected them of being HIV positive.

“You look fit,” I added. “I think kumusha life suits you.”

He laughed. “Things are tough, but it beats going to the office every day.”

He looked relaxed and happy. His eyes were bright and his skin shined with health.

“I thought you all were supposed to be starving here in Zimbabwe,” I said, laughing. “That’s what I read anyway.”

Terrance came by with a dish of water and we washed our hands.

The only light in Peter’s house came in a sliver from the open door. When I first entered from outside, I could only see the shapes of furniture— a bed on the far wall, a cupboard for clothes, a small sofa, coffee table, and a couple of chairs. Now with my eyes adjusted, I saw there were paintings of rural Zimbabwean landscapes hung on the wall and embroidered doilies on the backs of the sofa and chairs. It was the nicest furnished house I’d ever been in in the rural areas.

When the traffic of visitors died down and Peter and I sat across from each other in the fading light, I reached into the mesh pocket of my backpack and pulled out the nhekwe, setting it on the wooden table between us.

“I’ve come for a refill,” I said. The black carved horn sat upright, the only object on the table.

“Hey!” Peter called and slapped his knee. A new warmth spread across his face.

“Where is your mbira?” he asked.

I pulled the small wooden instrument out of my bag and set it on the table next to the nhekwe. When it hit the table, the metal keys vibrated, bouncing off the earthen walls.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I won’t make you play.”

He picked it up, stuck his pinky finger through the hole at the bottom right corner and began to play the first sweet notes of Nyamaropa, a song some said was the first song ever played on mbira. It was an ancient song about war, translating literally to ‘blood’ and ‘meat’ and captured all the sorrow and loss of battle in the repeating high notes. Most mbira songs remain unwritten and after six years away, I’d long since forgotten all but a few bars to Nyamaropa. It was lovely to hear it played again. It was lovely to be in the rural areas with nothing else to distract from the sound of tinkling keys.

When the sun set, Peter lit a paraffin lamp. Its flame flickered, throwing moving shadows on the walls. Before he left to sleep at Terrance’s place, he gave me a giant stick.

“For *magonzo*,” he said laughing.

My eyes widened. “Magonzo?” It was the word for rat, but people often used it to mean mouse too. “The small ones or the big ones?” I asked.

“Both,” he said, still laughing. I had once told him a story about being unable to sleep because of rats, huge ones, coming into the hut where I was sleeping in search of food.

“It’s kumusha, Kim,” he said. “We have magonzo.”

I slept with the paraffin lamp on all night, my sleep light, afraid both of the lamp catching fire and of every rustle I heard at the edges of the room. Sometime in the middle of the night I woke terrified, unsure if the rustling I’d heard was in my dream or in the house. I grabbed the stick and beat it against the floor on all sides of the bed. When I woke up next, sunlight was coming through the gaps in the thatched roof. I got up and sat outside, knowing someone would pass a message to Peter that I was awake.

“Did you need the stick?” he asked laughing when he came to get me.

We had maize meal porridge sweetened with honey one of Terrance’s friends had collected from a nearby beehive for breakfast. The honey was thick and dark. I swirled two big spoonfuls into my porridge and dug in, feeling my appetite open up as it always did out in the country.

“Are you ready for a tour?” Peter asked. We walked across the clearing in the village with Terrance and three of his friends and followed a wide path lined with elephant grass that

had clearly been a road, rather than a footpath. Peter and I walked quietly, but Terrance and his friends were loud, talking and hitting each other. The shortest one in the group did a handstand and walked for several minutes on his hands, keeping pace with the others. We took a narrow path that branched off the road and followed it into the woods to a riverbed.

I stared at the riverbed, unsure what I was seeing. The water sat greening, shallow and still way down low within the high red clay banks. The northern most side of the riverbank was marked with long narrow holes, some that went all the way down to the water, others that stopped halfway down. As far as I could follow the river in both directions, the riverbank was lined with those long, narrow holes. Peter let me stare for a while and didn't say anything until I looked back at him.

“When I first came here two years ago,” he said, “The river was still flowing.”

I scrunched up my face and looked back at the pockmarked bank. The holes are filled with standing water.

“They've mined the entire length of the river,” he said.

I shake my head. I want to be angry, but I can't. At who? I mostly just feel sad. Even after the political and economic situation stabilizes again in Zimbabwe, the environmental destruction will take decades to repair.

“You can't blame them,” Peter said. “What else were they supposed to do.”

“Right,” I said. “What good does it do to be the one abstaining when you know someone else will just come and mine your spot while you starve with your morals.”

“But are they getting anything?” I asked.

Peter nodded. “They wouldn’t do it for nothing,” he said.

I turned and looked back at the still river one more time before we left. I remembered in 2000 swimming in a clean, clear stream in the northeastern part of Zimbabwe when I stayed there with a friend’s family. The water was cold and deep in the narrow stream and we kicked along, warming ourselves on the rocks afterwards under the low hanging blue of the African sky.

We walked back to the road and followed it to a field where a pile of red earth lay in clumps. The ground was dug up in shallow patches around. Peter said this was a typical mine here.

“This is the ore,” he said, pointing to the clumps of earth. “They take it to the mill for grinding and separate out the gold.”

He smiled and said, “That’s the stage where I come in.”

“Are you running a mill?” I asked.

“No, Kim,” he said, “The mill is just the next village over.” He left it at that.

A million questions flooded my mind. Who decided what land was for whose mine? Where was the mill? Was there really much gold there? How did people not steal each other's ore?

Peter did his best to answer them.

“When the farm was redistributed in 2002, people claimed their spots,” he said. “They were planning to farm, but after a couple of years of trying, not much came of it. The tractor broke down, there was a drought, they didn't get fertilizer until halfway into the growing season.”

“They thought they were going to all instantly be living like the white farmer in the big house,” he said. “That's what they were promised.”

He told me most of the farm workers were originally from Malawi. Some of them had lived in Zimbabwe as laborers on commercial farms for two or three generations, but they still spoke a different dialect of Shona.

“When the crops failed and they realized just having land didn't make you rich, they started mining. It happened all over the country,” he said. “They started with the riverbanks and when that was finished, they came back to their plots of farmland.”

“But how do they not steal from one another?” I asked. “The ore is just sitting out in the open.”

“In the village,” he said, “Everyone knows everything. It polices itself.”

He looked around to the far edges of the horizon on either side. "Trust me, by afternoon everyone in the village will know exactly where we've walked today."

We walked closer to examine the hand-dug hole.

"It may not look like much," he said, "But people are making money."

It was unnerving for so much to be happening that I couldn't see even when I stared directly at it. The whole village looked nearly in a state of abandonment. The houses were falling apart and a deathly silence lay over the whole place. The dry land looked barren but was some of Zimbabwe's most fertile soil, gold scattered below its surface.

Peter and I walked back toward the village with Terrance and his friends trailing behind. They were still clowning around, seemingly unaffected by the destruction of their land. We stopped in front of another hut off from the two lines of homes.

"My office," Peter said as he unlocked the door.

Inside it was nearly empty. There was a reed mat on the floor and a small table. A window above the mat let the light in. I sat down on the floor and Peter reached into his pocket, pulled out a nhekwe made from a small gourd and tapped a mound into his palm and passed it to me.

"Before you go, I'll fill yours," he said.

When he finished his snuff, Peter reached up into the thatch above the window and pulled a small electronic device from between the reeds. I waited to have it explained to me. He put the device into the opposite pocket of his nhekwe. The faint knock of a woman came on the closed door.

“Pindai!” Peter called and the woman opened the door, entering clapping her cupped hands and calling out the traditional greetings. She wore a skirt, flip flops, and her hair was wrapped in floral print scarf. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw me. Her mouth hung open and she looked at Peter. From what I could follow he said something about me, I heard the word shamwari, *friend*, and his tone was reassuring. She came over to me and shook my hand, bowing her head down.

“Makasimba here?” I asked her, *are you well?* And she burst out laughing.

She sat on the floor, her legs extended out in front of her, crossed at the ankles and began talking with Peter in Shona. She reached into her bra and pulled out a small piece of folded paper. Peter took the device I’d seen him get from the thatch and set it on the ground. He took the paper from her, opened it, and poured the tiny pieces of gold onto the scale. The numbers jumped around and stabilized at .8. Eight milligrams, I assumed. They agreed on a price with very little back and forth and he pulled a thick wad of Zimbabwe dollars from his pocket and counted off two million dollars in two hundred thousand dollar notes. The woman slipped the money into her bra and got up to leave.

“Mazvaita,” she said, making the motion of clapping her hands, but not actually putting them together. She ducked out the door and was gone.

Peter waited until she was a safe distance away to speak. I looked at him, making my eyes big and raising my eyebrows.

“So,” he said slowly, drawing out my anguish. “This is how we do business in Mazowe.”

I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t really funny, but I started laughing quietly. My sides shook and my eyes burned with tears.

“Ndaona,” I said. *I see*. It was so absurd.

Peter laughed too, smiling widely and I saw part of his bringing me here was both to show me how life was on the redistributed farms, but it was also to have someone to share the strangeness of the experience with.

“This isn’t Rezende House,” I said, referring to the high rise building he had his industrial supply company in.

“This is the new Zimbabwe, Kim,” he said. The laughter went out of his voice. “If I don’t buy it, someone else will.” He slid the gold off the scale and into a little plastic baggie. “I’ll take this to town and sell it for double the price.”

“Why don’t they take it themselves?” I asked.

“They are making money,” he said. “They don’t really care if I make some too. Besides, who would they sell it to? I go around to different dealers I know and get the best price. They don’t have that time.”

He put the scale back into its hiding spot in the thatched roof and slipped the baggie with the gold flakes into his pants pocket.

“Toenda?” he asked, looking at me. *We go?*

I nodded. We walked the footpath back toward his house, passing small huts with peeling stucco and tattered thatch. Smoke rose from the cooking huts and villagers sat, reclined in the sliver of shadow made by their roofs. They raised their hands to us as we passed, some calling out, *Masikati!*, the afternoon greeting in Shona. It was an idyllic scene. The postcard picture of an African village.

I shook my head and wondered if it was better for these villagers this way, in the new Zimbabwe? I wondered what would happen to them when the gold ran out.

Peter looked at me.

“Sha,” he said, reading my furrowed brow, “Right now, they are making money and so am I.”

I thought of the minerals sprinkled throughout the ground we walked on, imagining flecks of gold scattered shining in the deep layers of soil. There was so much unseen, so much unclear, even when you dug way down deep into the rich, red earth.