

The last any of us ever saw of her was in the photograph. That black and white photograph, stylized and contrived despite its simplicity. That photograph which aroused more questions than it answered. (And of course, the first and most basic question being: *who would have taken the photograph?*) We scrutinized and speculated and extrapolated but could reach no certainty, no conclusion. Because in the end, there was only that final photograph.

Significantly, the photograph showed her *walking away*. Wearing faded ragged jeans, a shapeless, light-coloured t-shirt, and dark sandals. No purse, no bag, no props of any kind. Her back to the photographer, heading out past what appeared to be an abandoned gas station, where one might have bought Coke in a squat glass bottle and cigarettes in a soft package. Across a highway that at some point had most certainly been a road to *somewhere*, a highway that had acquired the look of most derelict roadways in the Africa of this century. Pitted asphalt, eroded and weed-choked shoulders, faded dividing lines, a buckling and heaving ribbon stretched out pitifully and pointlessly in the sun. And in that photograph, she is about to cross the road, going toward nowhere in particular. There is little to note in the surrounding landscape: some low scrub brush, precariously anchored in the sunburned and drought-stricken soil, and dark rolling hills in the distant ground. Walking away from little, walking toward even less.

The photograph as a statement, an affirmation with a question mark: what brought her there? Was there anything in the photograph that could tell the broader tale, beyond the relentless light of that captured frame? What this photograph and all the absent, non-existent other photographs do not tell is the story of her tendencies. A curiosity that engendered interests that bordered on obsessions, somewhat somber, always pessimistic, consistently dark. *A taste for the apocalyptic*, she had once laughingly told a friend in a rare moment of self-revelation. And so that taste for the apocalyptic took her to many places in Africa, seemingly always one step ahead of the storm. In reality, though, it took her directly into the eye of many.

Certainly, that single black and white photograph must have been preceded by one that featured the appearance of Mr. Shumba, the tidy little district school headmaster with the sky-blue safari suit who appeared one afternoon at the edge of the school yard, where she stood tossing feed to scrawny chickens. He would have stood in a seemingly apologetic posture, shrugging with a kind of helplessness, gleaming with nervous sweat, clutching the battered leather briefcase to his chest, speaking in a voice no longer mellifluous but hollow and robotic. Telling her in a few innocuous words how "government people" had visited him that afternoon and requested that the white schoolteacher leave, immediately.

Leave the forty-three keen faces that listened with rapt attention to her explanations of cave imagery in *A Passage to India*. The forty-three hands equipped with a motley assortment of pens and pencils, writing in the pink, yellow, blue and green notebooks emblazoned with the map of Canada, sent by a bemused, indulgent sister, or taking notes as she described the rivers of France and the forced collectivization of farms in the Ukraine. The forty-three dark faces that sat wide-eyed as she recounted the fate of the last, beleaguered surviving cannibals of the Franklin expedition, lost in a forbidden white landscape that the children could barely imagine for its cruel and frigid beauty. The forty-three voices that sang at the beginning of each day in solemn, soul-stirring harmony, in a language she could barely comprehend. Leave the three AIDS orphans

who waited for her at the end of every day, for meals and emotional nourishment, who stood at the door of the one-room schoolhouse, the schoolhouse a gift from some distant Canadian charity which no longer existed and had long since ceased to provide funds for repairs needed on desks and walls and doors. Leave the crowded weekly bus rides into the nearby market town, surrounded by beer-drunken lecherous men who, when they paused to speak to her in the cacophony of the crush and were able to concentrate through their alcohol-fuelled fog, could only guess her accent as something akin to Rhodesian, linguistic chameleon that she was. Leave the minimalist order she had created in that dust-caked house, where the silence of the vast landscape at night crowded around her and weighed down upon the mud roof. Lying in bed, praying not to a god or many, placing her faith in the statistical phenomenon known as “reversion to the mean”, whereby an extreme event is likely to be followed by a less extreme event. Willfully ignoring the fact that it was only ever a probability, not a law.

Had there been some previous sequence of photographs, they might have been arranged like this: one could have portrayed her in an earlier scene, panic-stricken yet mesmerized, as she stood in that garbage-strewn lot, next to the shelled building that once was a bank and had hinted at the promise of an economy. Watching the Most Reverend Watkins as he exhorted the crowd to burn their most prized possessions. Like a 21st century African incarnation of Savonarola, not in Piazza della Signoria but in Independence Square, as though history had telescoped itself some five hundred years in the turning of a page. Those followers with already so little, chanting in their frenzied and fevered tone, as the flames generously doused with the gasoline of the multinational corporation—that proclaimed itself a visionary of Africa’s future—consumed with ceremony their material goods, in a bonfire of their apparent vanities. The vanities being a pink and white striped party dress which had served to celebrate a birth and a high school graduation and a sister’s wedding; a brick-sized cellphone from an earlier era, one of those miraculous devices used to call the faithful to this precise location in time; and books with surprising titles like *A Bend in the River*, *Leveraging Chaos* or *The Reign of the Big Men*.

There might also have been a photograph that showed her in a previous time, surviving the wreckage around her by recreating the horrors of a post-colonial hell. Through written words and digital illustration, creating faithful representations, both verbal and visual, of child soldiers high on glue brandishing Kalashnikovs at street barricades, staggering trance-like in clown wigs and designer jeans and high-end running shoes worn by the likes of American basketball stars, dancing half-naked not to drums or tribal bush chants but to LA rap artists blaring from the windows of Japanese pick-up trucks. And then in the evening, comparing notes on the day’s depravity with sleep-deprived strangers in the lobby of a once-chic but still well-stocked hotel with a slightly algaeic pool. Or finessing the photographic evidence of her wakeful nightmares with an 8 mega pixel camera bought in the fluorescent-lit duty-free airport of a European capital where the multi-lingual young clerk had painstakingly extolled the camera’s ability to capture action of all kinds, especially animals in the wild. Or animals of another kind, like those encountered in these jungle cityscapes.

Perhaps some other photograph would have shown her cooking curried goat stew for the likes of Father Silveira, that unlikely priestly product of Goa with its countless hallowed places of worship, its beaches, its tacky souvenirs of brass and clay for the one million annual tourists, as he sought to explain his simple plan, his exalted

vocation, for the reintegration of twelve year-old child soldiers into a life of basic work and play. Father Silveira attempting to create a semblance of ordinariness, seemingly oblivious to the contrast between the heavenly landscapes of Goa and his less than celestial surroundings. An ordinariness made ordinary by the feeding of goats in a small yard, the playing of soccer with a rag ball, or the sorting through of paint-splattered, second-hand t-shirts, with logos of the Willow Bunch, SK softball team or the *Let's Find the Cure!* marathon run. The gesture of charity begun in suburban Calgary, echoed several times over, ending in this camp in rural Africa. Subtly underlining the irony that recycling does indeed have global implications.

Yet another photograph would have portrayed her patiently and painstakingly excising from refugees all their imagination-defying stories, trying to recreate some sad human logic in tales of massacres committed with the most low-tech of farm implements, administered neighbour against neighbour in the lush steamy hills. And when not trying to nurse emotional and existential wounds that were beyond a cure, trying to navigate through the hysteria rampant amongst the disease-ridden tents where some anonymous Canadian donor's ten dollars had helped re-establish the relative order of rape, terror and murder in a land once owned as the personal fiefdom of some distant European king. As though there were any logic or any purpose in trying to find the index cases of cholera and typhoid in the midst of a half-million living corpses, left to decay.

Some other photograph would have attempted to depict her sadness nearing despair, as she rode silently in the rear seat of a climate-controlled white Land Cruiser with independent rear suspension, listening to the gin-addled tales of a handsome American physician and a talented German engineer, as they boasted of their bravura, their daily brushes with death, while dispensing salvation in the form of generic drugs and environmentally-friendly latrines. Their voices full of mockery and derision for the supposed beneficiaries of their largesse. As though the gift of giving had given back in its opposite form, as though the mirror had somehow become a confusing kaleidoscope full of brightly-coloured broken glass, fascinating for its complexity and its inability to reconstruct reality. Sitting in the traffic, with the government troops of that particular week brutalizing a man who stood in the back of a pickup truck, his hands trussed behind his back. The scene reminding her of a *real* photo, one that existed in some historical archive, somewhere, of a similar man in a white shirt and dark pants, wire-rimmed glasses slightly askew, a photo showing Patrice Lumumba, the beer salesman turned revolutionary, as he faced his humiliation with all that remained of his dignity. The scene emphasizing the point that in history there are only a finite number of variations on a theme.

And ultimately (or initially), one final photograph might have tried to represent the genesis of her idea, an embryo of a less tangible sort, some retracing of the steps that had lead her to the scene of that last photograph. It would have shown her dancing naked and pregnant (with the child that, in the end, never was) in a dark and empty apartment, a cheap radio playing a slow and mournful Hugh Masekela tune, in the rainy and most un-African city of Vancouver. Dancing with the man who remained mostly a stranger, her head resting in the nape of his neck, against his square jaw and strong chin, dreaming of his cavernous mouth and unspoken erotic words, formulated with syntactic liquidity in the Queen's English and coloured only slightly—to the astute ear—by the remnants of a mother tongue that was likely Afrikaans. The man who still referred to

Maputo as Lourenço Marques and had once described with a note of melancholy its markets and cafés and traffic and teeming crowds and darkened alleyway scents born of spices and coffee beans and Camel cigarette smoke. As though the name of that city must have somehow stirred in her something more than just imagery, something resembling carnal knowledge of the geography, an innate certitude that something awaited her there. As though the mere name of a city could have begun this journey, a name referring only to a long-forgotten Portuguese navigator, a name which should not have had such conjuring powers, a name which did not speak for and of itself, the way places like Desolation Sound or Finistère or Big Desert did, places that effortlessly depicted themselves in the imagination as exactly what they were: a place of unspeakable forlornness, the end of the medieval earth, an immeasurable universe of sand. Like the map of early explorers, the continent etched itself in her, like an emotional geometry, in all its immensity, in all its unknown, as a state to be sought by her, as a place to be found for her.