

ERICA BLEEG

The Country They Lost

A review of *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa* by Peter Godwin (Little, Brown, 2007) and *Rainbow's End: A Memoir of Childhood, War and an African Farm* by Lauren St John (Scribner, 2007).

In 1950, when the postwar movement toward African decolonization was accelerating, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire published his seminal essay, “Discourse on Colonialism,” a polemic that launched a rich and long-lasting discussion about the impact of colonialism on the minds of the colonizer and the colonized. One of Césaire’s central arguments is that in order to justify itself as the world’s “civilizers,” Europe invented a way of thinking about indigenous peoples as “barbaric” and “inferior,” a mindset that is dehumanizing, not only to the colonized, but also to the colonizer. In more recent years, Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina has expressed similar exasperation toward the prevailing generalizations about Africa and Africans found in literature. In his satirical essay, “How to Write About Africa,” published in a 2005 issue of *Granta*, he writes: “Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it Your African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants Or corrupt politicians.” The implied culprits of Wainaina’s poignant critique are Western (white) writers, specifically, their common failure to be precise when imagining the fifty-four countries of this vast continent and its 900 million diverse people. Recent memoirs set in “Africa” show how some white writers reinforce the paradigm Césaire and Wainaina describe while others make significant strides in overcoming it. Taken collectively, they reveal the complexities of trying to effect a shift in consciousness.

From Olive Schreiner’s nostalgic *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) to Sarah Gertrude Millin’s overtly racist *God’s Stepchildren* (1927), colonial memoirs of Southern Africa have tended to focus on pastoral themes and portray Africans as primitive, docile, or menacing. Unlike their colonial predecessors, more recent memoirs often depict the guns-and-beer culture of whites behaving badly. Still, more often than not, African characters come across as generic and

168

incidental. Perhaps best known is Alexandra Fuller's memoir about growing up in Rhodesia during the liberation wars of the 1960s and 70s, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2001). Here Fuller refers to blacks as "schoolboy," "houseboy," and "ranch manager," usually without names. When Violet, her family's housemaid, is sliced open by "terrorists," we only learn about the incident, but not a single detail about Violet's character. This isn't necessarily a sign of ill will, but an indication of how deeply segregation and war can permeate and compromise the imagination.

Two recent memoirs, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* by Peter Godwin and *Rainbow's End* by Lauren St John, portray two different eras of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe's transition into independence. Godwin's memoir covers 1997–2004, St John's 1976–1983, and although during the intervening twenty years Zimbabwe thrived, the backdrop of both memoirs is one of mayhem.

When a Crocodile Eats the Sun is Peter Godwin's second memoir set in former Rhodesia. His first, *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa* (1996), covers his experiences of the liberation war period, during which his older sister Jain, her fiancé, and best man are killed in a roadside ambush weeks before her wedding. In *Crocodile*, the exiled Godwin writes: "her death is the ugly scar that overlays our family's emotional topography." Though he doesn't bring it up again, his family's loss is palpable as he chronicles his frequent travels back to Zimbabwe on journalism assignments that enable him to visit his younger sister Georgina and care for his aging parents, particularly his father, whose deteriorating health parallels Zimbabwe's socio-economic collapse.

In 1997, Godwin is on assignment in Zululand for *National Geographic* when he learns his father, 72, has had a heart attack. He desperately wants "a way to help" him recover while also grappling with a longstanding anger that he doesn't measure up to his father's standards: "I am just a journalist, a hack. I don't have a *real* job." Before the elder Godwin recovers, the author tries to imagine writing the obituary and realizes he knows "almost nothing" about his father's background. This eventually leads to the story's chief revelation: the father he'd always known as George Godwin, an Englishman, is actually a Polish Jew named Kazimierz Goldfarb, who lost his family to the Holocaust.

From here, in some of the most affecting passages of the book, the estranged son struggles bravely and awkwardly to reorient himself to his “distant” father. Likewise, the father, furnishing the author with a family tree and personal history notes, “tries to reintroduce himself to his own son.”

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe is in crisis. Godwin’s mother, a doctor in her 70s, continues to work at an understaffed Harare hospital where beds are filled with AIDS patients. At independence in 1980, life expectancy was almost sixty; in the late 1990s, it’s down to thirty-three. When President Mugabe reaches his term limit in 2000, attempting to persuade his government to extend his rule, he writes a referendum that would allow “the seizure of commercial farmland and its redistribution to black peasants.” Since colonization, the one-percent white population has owned the majority of arable land. Land redistribution is a good idea, but the legislative body wants Mugabe out and votes against it. Within days, “a rag tag collection of Mugabe supporters and unemployed youths” dressed in battle fatigues and wielding AK-47s descend on white-owned farms, sometimes brutally murdering the white farmers, other times holding them hostage. These occupiers call themselves “war vets,” a claim Godwin disputes and prefers to call them “wovits,” joining his white comrades in making fun of their pronunciation. Farm production comes “almost to a standstill” in a country once considered Southern Africa’s breadbasket. When the war vets disperse and Mugabe’s ministers and functionaries, “the real players,” move in, it becomes clear that these takeovers have nothing to do with redistributing land to those most in need.

While the economy crashes, Godwin focuses on documenting the climate of increasing insecurity for whites through countless interviews with beleaguered white farmers, alternating with the effects of hyperinflation on his parents: they can no longer afford the chemicals for their swimming pool; they can no longer afford to send Christmas cards abroad. Then in 2001, Godwin’s father is beat up in a carjack right outside their suburban home. The next year, father and son see a race-baiting TV commercial in which “well-dressed black man” displays his nearly empty fridge, then “leaps into a yellow Mercedes,” ultimately arriving at the farm of “MR. BIG WHITE” to take it over, and Godwin’s father gravely says, “‘Being a white here is starting to feel a bit like being a Jew in Poland.’”

Like his father, Godwin is dispossessed. Using the persecution his father has suffered as a frame, he tries to understand his own experience: "Like Poland was to him, Africa is for me... a dangerous place that will, if I allow it to, reach into my life and hurt my family. A white in Africa is like a Jew everywhere." Having lost his sister, this is an understandable reaction. Too close to the events, however, Godwin doesn't seem aware of the precariousness of this comparison or how seeing his race as victims has skewed his ability to provide a more balanced picture of the current national crisis. He makes no comparable efforts to seek out black individuals to learn about the suffering they have endured during this period, but overwhelmingly portrays blacks as a collective "they" overshadowed by Mugabe's corrupt ministers and pawns. The effect is misleading, and yet other stories were there to be had. Tucked into my copy of Fuller's *Dogs*, for example, is a February 2003 *New York Times* article about the tens of thousands of black Zimbabweans trying to flee across the South African border because of widespread food shortages and increasing violence. Mandla Ngwenya, 21 years old, reported that government-backed militants came to his village and ordered people to invade white farms: "Those who refused were beaten. 'Even old people were beaten.'"

At its finest, Godwin's second memoir offers a bracing reconciliation between father and son.

Rainbow's End is Lauren St John's first memoir about her life in Rhodesia. It opens on the thousand-acre farm and game preserve for which the book is named. Five miles from town, Rainbow's End is "the perfect place for an ambush." In 1978, St John's eleven-year-old classmate, Bruce Forrester, is living there with his family until a January evening when he is shot dead, as is his father and a friend, when guerilla soldiers attack their home. Six months later, St John's family moves in.

Before moving to Rainbow's End, St John, the older of two girls, lives on Giant Estate where her father, Errol Coetzee, is the farm manager, working in the fields alongside blacks he refers to as "*munts*." In his circle, this is a common derogatory term for "African." Romping around barefoot in her "WE MADE RHODESIA GREAT" T-shirt, young St John doesn't question these epithets or stereotypes about blacks. A "horse-obsessed" dog lover, she is

preoccupied with animals and bent on proving she is “as good as a boy” to a father who “valued courage . . . more highly than any other characteristic.” Lean and tattooed with “film-star eyes,” her adoring but elusive father often throws himself and his family in the way of danger. The author’s gradual realization that her dashing father is a deeply flawed man is one of the many tender threads of this complex narrative.

A keen observer of human relationships and cultural pathologies, St John deftly portrays the mental and physical landscapes of an era. At her whites-only school, “Miss North spun wonderfully romantic yarns” about the heroics of Cecil John Rhodes, who named Rhodesia for himself and “during the Matabele Rebellion of 1896 rode unarmed into the Matopo Hills to negotiate with the rebel chiefs and bring about a lasting peace.” “I listened to all of this,” St John writes, “and felt a part of it.” Complicating her loyalties are scenes that reveal the shame and tensions of segregation, as when the adults accuse Maud, their housemaid, of stealing an encyclopedia that St John gave to her. Through these fraught vignettes and also by placing her experiences in a wider historical context, the author creates an ironic distance between the narrator and her subject that suggests the perceptions she clings to as a child will be upended.

In 1978, because her father can’t stand another day of working for the bellicose owner of Giant Estate, he accepts the position of managing the tobacco farm at Rainbow’s End. As before, her parents fight often. Her father dallies with married women. Her mother, May, dresses like a debutante and travels abroad often, leaving the rest of the family behind. Amid these tensions, young St John finds solace among nature and animals. They have dogs and horses; a giraffe lives at the bottom of the garden. “If ever a paradise was invented for a child it was Rainbow’s End,” and yet, as she becomes more attuned to the shadowy side of living in a privileged idyll, this is also the place, writes St John, “where most of your truths have been shown to be lies.”

As St John’s disillusionment with her family and country escalates, she searches elsewhere for truth. After their African housegirl Agnes is “murdered as a sellout,” presumably by guerilla fighters, she questions “the unspoken wall between me and the Africans” and how little she knows about their lives. When former guerilla leader Robert Mugabe is elected Prime Minister in 1980, elated Africans flood the

streets, and for St John their “euphoria . . . was the giveaway” that during the war, her people weren’t fighting against terrorism or communism, as she’d been told. “We were the terrorists,” she writes. “We had . . . oppressed people, tortured people, and murdered people, for the worst possible reason: the color of their skin.”

Rainbow’s End is a story St John tells in such gorgeously lucid prose I found myself reading her sentences again and again, just to re-experience the vitality of her words. Occasionally, she stumbles into hidebound generalizations—“black Africa in all of its musical, magical, violent, untamed, unpredictable glory”—but these are rare blunders. It is the author’s ability to put her perspectives under scrutiny, simultaneously rupturing colonial ideologies, that make *Rainbow’s End* an impressive achievement, demonstrating a long-awaited shift in the way memoirs by former colonizers are told.