

# Bill Schermbrucker / WALK THAT LAND AGAIN: A TRAVEL JOURNAL

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I came to Canada in 1964 from my native Kenya, and in 1983 I published a first book of fiction, *Chameleon & Other Stories*. Someone sent a copy to my godparents, Mona and Robin Stanley, on their isolated farm in Kenya, and Mona wrote to say that she wanted to see me. My book received good publicity, including an interview on CBC *Morningside* with Peter Gzowski, who picked up on my nervousness and asked me why I didn't just keep Kenya as a world of imagination: "Why must you go back and walk that land again"? The following are some excerpts from the book I wrote about that trip. Mona and Robin were now in their eighties, and the farm, "Yoani," was run by their son David ("Dibs") and his wife Jane — who last year in turn passed it over to their son, "Little" Robin.

## Chapter 6 (excerpts)

11<sup>th</sup> May 1984, “Yoani Estate,” Kima, Kenya

I look across towards the vegetable garden and notice a young man standing in the shade of a dark green flamboyant tree, close to the creamery. I notice him because he’s been standing there for a long time — why! I believe he was there when Jane and I drove up with the cream milk, at least an hour ago.

“Who’s that guy?” I ask when Dibs climbs back in.

Dibs regards him distantly, as though contemplating the same question. “Let’s go and find out,” he says. Driving over, he explains that it’s a convention on the farm for strangers who are looking for work to go and wait under the tree. “There’s somebody waiting there almost every day,” he says.

We pull up beside the man. He’s in his twenties, medium height and skinny. He’s dressed neatly in brown cotton shorts, a plain blue shirt, and a pair of plastic sandals. He steps forward to Dibs’ side window.

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“*Natafuta kazi, bwana*. I’m looking for work.”

“What’s your name?”

There follows a question and answer session for several minutes. What village does he come from? Who in that village will vouch for him? Who of the present work force on the farm will vouch for him? Documents are passed back and forth: identity card; Intermediate School report; letter of reference. Dibs has put on his reading glasses, opened a thick notebook and begun carefully taking down details.

“Why did you stop school at Standard Eight?”

“*Nimeshindwa na pesa*. I was defeated by lack of money.”

Secondary school is not free. Every student must find shs. 1000/– to 1500/– per term, three terms per year (Cdn \$350 to 450 per

student, per year). If this man is lucky and gets to work here at the base rate, he'll gross \$50 per month. It's obvious that he will never get back to school.

In any case, he's too old. His life is pretty much circumscribed, as his parents' lives were before him. They waited for *Uhuru*, Freedom. *Uhuru na Kazi!* Freedom and Jobs! *Uhuru na Unmoja!* Freedom and Unity! Those were the slogans of promise in 1963. It hasn't happened. Instead it's *Uhuru na Njaa*, Freedom and Hunger, Freedom and AIDS. What will this man and his children wait for? The People's Revolution? "Death to Foreign Hyenas and their Neo-colonialist Running Dogs!" "Implement the Marxist State!" "Freedom! Work! Dignity!" When will that be?

Dibs contemplates his notes.

The man in search of work waits, pathetically, his stance frozen, just as he has waited all this morning beneath this tree of hope. He blinks his eyes. He waits.

Dibs folds his notebook shut and takes off his reading glasses. "There's no work here today," he says. "If I want you later, I'll send a message."

The man makes no reply. As we drive away, I look back and see him slouch off towards the Kiu Station road.

"How many people do you employ on the farm, Dibs?"

"I think thirty-seven at the moment."

"All at twenty-five shillings a day?"

"That's the base rate. Some of them earn quite a bit more. Also they get their *posho* [maize meal] at a subsidized rate."

"And *will* you send for that guy later?"

"No," says Dibs firmly. "His village up there by Marwa Estate is a hotbed of thieves."

"So why did you bother writing all the notes?"

"Self-protection," he says.

"From what?"

"From theft, for one thing."

"Aren't you supposed to leave that to the police?"

Dibs emits a single dry laugh. "Yes," he says, "only they never have any petrol for their Land Rover. I've got a case pending now with

them. Ten 90-litre milk cans were stolen from the dairy. I sent for them, and they came over on their bicycles from the station at Maiani. They investigated, but they couldn't find anything. In the end, I found three of the cans, and the police took them from me and locked them up. They said they need them for evidence. Months have gone by now and the case isn't solved. But I bet I could find the rest of those cans. Just search the village of that bloke looking for work. I keep any information I get, Bill. Who's staying where, who's out of work, and so forth. You have to protect yourself."

"How much is a milk can worth?"

"About a thousand bob."

"So in all, that's about a thousand dollar theft in Canadian money. Does the insurance cover it?"

"What insurance?" He laughs again.

I recall that the milk cans have vivid yellow circles painted on them, and on the lids. A crude security measure, like cattle branding.

We spend the rest of the morning vaccinating. Today, one of the senior men, Malua, gets shouted at for misusing the red-handled battery-powered cattle prod as a stick. He whacks a cow's rump with it, then lowers his eyes while Dibs complains that he'll break it like that. Again I'm reminded of myself bitching at my son, in this case my eldest boy, David, who is serious and responsible and proud, like Malua. (And one day my son had had enough, and turned to me in a rage and yelled, "Oh, fuck off, Bill!" But I don't think Malua is going to say that to Dibs. Not before the *second* people's revolution, anyway.)

Six M2 cows, sixty-four dry cows, a hundred and thirty-eight steers . . . . By lunch time I'm faint from the dryness and the heat. Large cumulonimbus clouds roll up tantalizingly from the south, cruelly tinged dark on the bottom, as though carrying rain.

At the house, Dibs sends me with Kachula, the other senior man, to do the sick cows. I feel a little teenage rush of pleasure at being trusted not to damage the glass-bodied pistol grip syringe. Kachula herds them into a corrall and I start from the front and work through them, taking twice as long as Dibs for each one. Once I jab into the cow's flesh beneath the skin, and she jumps and moans,

wild-eyed. She flings her head desperately left and right, slathering my face with infected saliva. Back at the house, I hand Jane the equipment, pleased to have made my small contribution. Robin is waiting to drive me up the hill to lunch, but he accepts my offer to do the driving. I would like to take my camera, but I don't want to spook Robin. Later.

In the sitting room, Mona stands close beside me and touches my face, studying it.

"Oo-oooh!" she says in her typical drawn-out voice, "You look like your mother. You have her cheekbones. And her nose."

The scent of her body, together with the familiarity of her voice, keeps surprising me by breaking through that vacuum of time and geography I have set around myself: my mother is not real, Mo and Rob are not real — one's been dead for thirty-five years, and the other two are characters in a book I wrote, Marie and Martin Johnson. Oh no they're not!

In any case, it's time to bring the subject up. I haven't come all this way to be put off by Dibs' warning not to mention my book to her. I wait till I've finished eating and Mo has too; Rob is still picking at his plate with a fork.

"Well, what did you think of my book, Amo?"

"Yourwhat?"

"My book. *Chameleon and other Stories*."

Mo erupts in a shower of protest. **DON'T TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT BOOK! HOW COULD YOU? YOU WERE PROPERLY BROUGHT UP BY YOUR PARENTS AND BY US! . . . AND NOW THIS! . . .**

I stare at the table till it's over. I try to look humble and possibly even contrite. I'm waiting for the specific charge, but it doesn't come.

"Amo, could you tell me exactly what it is you didn't like about the book?"

She stares at me in amazement. I don't *know*? It's not obvious?

"That *language*!" she says. "How could you!"

It's all I can do to suppress an open laugh. After all my fears . . .

that she might feel I had betrayed her, either because I voice criticism of white Kenyans and the colonial government, or more personally because I lifted some sentences from an actual letter of hers in “Afterbirth,” or by the picture I paint of her, etc. Now it turns out it’s the half dozen four-letter words in the book that have shocked her.

I try to remember the contexts in which they occur. “You know,” Roger Ash says in the story of that name, as he’s about to desert from the army during Mau Mau, “They call this a fucking emergency, but it isn’t a fucking emergency. It’s a fucking war!”

“But, Amo,” I say, “you must understand that when I’m writing about a soldier, say, I have to make him speak the way soldiers really do speak.” (Even as I’m offering up this standard defence, I’m recalling the elegant dressing down I got from another Mona, my piano teacher in Burnaby: “My dear Bill,” she grimaced, “to convey vulgarity it is not necessary to be vulgar. One can . . . suggest.”)

Robin turns to Mo and takes me off the hook: “Bill has been . . . giving Dibs a hand . . . with the vaccinating,” he tells her. “A tremendous help.”

“Oh how *kind* of you. How wonderf — by the way,” says Mo, “this Mrs. Johnson in your book — ”

(Oh God no! Here it comes after all!)

“Now I know that it’s just a story and she’s not really supposed to be me.”

“Yes, that’s right!”

“But she *is* me!”

“Well — ”

“But what I want to ask you is this: In the book you make her say ‘My Godfathers!’ Now, I never used to say ‘My Godfathers!’ So why — ”

Robin is interrupting her, shaking his hand at her in a sort of cutting motion.

“Y-y-yes! Y-yehh-s! You did!”

Two against one. Mo gives up.

But I don’t know if Robin is remembering accurately, or just taking the opportunity to put one over on her. *Did* she use the expression, or did I make that up? Can’t remember.

Meanwhile, Mo's talking about theft. "And I tell you, there are an awful lot of the B-stewards around, these days!"

Well, there it is, Mo! If you didn't say 'Godfathers' you said 'B-stewards.' What a generation for euphemisms! (Canada the same as Kenya, as far as I can tell — probably it was the same all over the English-speaking world.) Heaven forbid that you say a "bad word" like "God!" or "fart" or "sex." "Bastards" must be euphemised to "bar stewards," — no, even that's still too close, so go another step to "B-stewards." No wonder so many of my generation, especially academics, reacted by calling a spade a spade and a shit a shit.

Come to think of it, Marie Johnson's "My Godfathers!" probably didn't come from Mo, but from Miss O'Flynn, my earliest teacher at St Mary's school. Surrounded by Catholic priests, she had to disguise her blasphemies. "My *God*-fathers!" she would yell, at our infractions, leaving an alarming pause between syllables for dramatic effect.

At any rate, now that Mo has chastised me for "that language," it seems we are free to talk about the book.

"There were some things in it I didn't know about," she says.

## Chapter 9 (excerpts)

14<sup>th</sup> May 1984, “Yoani Estate,” Kima, Kenya

We begin the slow, heavy drive to the creamery. I stop for a moment after closing the wire gate to take in the surroundings: Acacia and Euphorbia Candelabra trees; dry, sandy soil, with here and there a tuft of dry grass but not a drop of dew; and the sun at seven o'clock already hot and bright. Background zinging of insects, and many different birdcalls.

“It’s really something special,” I tell Jane, as I get back in.

“What is?”

“What you have here. In all this difficulty — drought, Foot and Mouth, poverty and disease, theft — it is so tranquil. It’s a marvel that you continue just simply running the farm, and that you’re permitted to.”

Jane listens solemnly. She doesn’t drive on but sits pondering my words in silence. It’s as though I’ve said something either blasphemous or the opposite. Later, at a relaxed moment after a meal, she repeats what I said to Dibs, in a quiet voice. And it’s *then* that I realize what I’ve felt about her ever since the moment we first met, a few days ago: she has a religious dimension. It wouldn’t surprise me to find out that she was a Quaker or something like that. There is a kind of spiritual self-possession about her, a core of stillness, which enables her to live her life in the bush unintimidated by the naked threats and dangers that surround them.

At the dairy, Dibs comes striding down from the house, agitated. “Well, we’ve had the *waisi ya maji* today!” he says with a grim smile.

“Water thieves?”

“Up at the tank behind the old folks’ house. They had their scout on the hill, and he saw me coming. I watched them running like hell with their wheelbarrows and their plastic jerry cans.”

“You can’t let them take a bit of water then?”



"I can't let them take a *drop*, Bill. There'd be a procession of people like you've never seen. My tank would be empty in no time. No water, no farm. Simple as that. Rough, but that's the fact of the matter."

I have an image in my mind: a child in Canada stands at the bathroom sink, slowly, methodically brushing his teeth. The cold tap is open, and beautiful, clear, aerated water pours down the drain, litre after litre.

I think about the competition for basic resources and commodities that this particular part of Kenya south of Nairobi has seen over the years — over *centuries*. The scout on the hill is not new. He or she is an institution going back to the original Kamba settlements here around 1650, when they drove out the Wasejegu and the earlier bushmen hunters called the Anoka: the scout on the hill, watching for poachers, or spying out cattle to poach, watching for Maasai raiders, for Swahili and Arab slave traders with whom to do business, selling them food and supplies. The scout on the hill today, keeping a lookout against Dibs, while the women hasten to fill a jerry can of water for their families. "Run!" he shouts, "Run like hell! The *mzungu* is coming." What a struggle.

"You want to come to Konza Station with me, Bill?" Dibs asks.

"Sure."

"You want to drive the Toyota?"

"No thanks, Dibs, you drive. I'm still too unaccustomed to it — I'd end up on the wrong side of the road." (But why Konza, 30 km away? Kima and Kiu are much closer stations on the railway. Even Ulu. Why Konza?)

Dibs is rattling on about how the Stanley brothers first got interested in this improbable area for farming, how Jock Stanley and partners bought their farm at Kima originally in the 1940s from one Colonel Neave. (The name lodges on my memory, and a few years later, I'm introduced to his granddaughter, Dorinda, who has just been hired to teach at Capilano College, North Vancouver, where I also work. Small world!)

Dibs concentrates on his driving as the Land Cruiser moves carefully down the bumpy road. Then, as though in answer to my

question about Konza, he volunteers: "You have to think ahead in this game, Bill. You think this is bad?" he asks rhetorically, waving his hand at the dry savannah around us.

"I don't think I've ever seen the country round here this dry."

"Yeah. Well, tomorrow is the last day of the theoretical 'long rains.' The convection centre will have passed then, and we can expect nothing till the 'short rains' in November. May, June . . ." emphatically, finger by finger, he counts off the seven months till he has only the faintest grip left on the steering wheel.

"So what do they sell at Konza? Rain spells?"

He grins. He waits for a lorry to pass, then pulls out left onto the main road, before answering. "*Posho*," he says and waits for this to sink in.

"You're going to feed your cows *posho*?"

"NO-O!" he says, in that big old Stanley voice, reminding me of the way his uncle Jock would dismiss a foolish point from one of us uncomprehending city-dwellers. Then, with patient emphasis he explains: "If you can keep your people well fed, *they* will stay on the job when the brutal heavy work comes, cutting grass and leleshwa up in the hills and bringing it down for the cattle."

"I see. You can grind up leleshwa bushes?"

He nods. "But you have to think ahead. Pretty soon there won't be enough *posho*. People will be scrambling and fighting for it, and you'll have to wait your turn, and then they'll limit the number of bags you can have. I *think* we're in time. We'll see what it's like when we get to Konza. But it's a Monday morning, people are still thinking it's going to rain . . . I think we're ahead of the game. Have to be a bit quiet about it though. Make two or three trips in this pickup instead of taking the big lorry. Don't want to call attention. We'll see."

We enter the fenced compound of the Kenya Cereals Board depot at Konza, past a guard booth. A plump, serious-faced Kikuyu woman in the office tells Dibs that the manager is not available, but if we wait he will see us in due course. I ask her if I may take a picture in the office, and she agrees. As I focus the camera, self-consciousness spreads the beginning of a coy giggle across her face. I can see she wants to lift her hand to her eyes, but she doesn't. She stands beside

her typewriter desk pressing a stamp onto a form and smiles at the camera. Despite the residual touch of coyness, she emanates a certain presence here. She is simply dressed, white orlon sweater, a long skirt ringed with vivid green, blue and yellow, and a modest striped bandanna. No jewellery, no watch. But she bears herself with authority. The office looks somewhat untidy, and a single shabby curtain hangs bunched in the middle of the window, several of its hooks missing.

There's no place to wait in the office. Outside, several big lorries are parked, and their drivers wait silently on chairs lined up before the office door. Dibs makes small talk: "No rain." "How is your *shamba* [farm]?" "This man comes from Canada. . . ."

The men reply easily: "How is Canada?" "Fine, too much water, too much rain." Ha-ha! Big joke.

"Of course," Dibs says confidentially, as we stroll away patiently, "a bit of *bakshishi* would probably speed things up."

"You would do that?"

"No! I've never paid a bribe in my life. Once you start that stuff, it never ends."

"Is there a lot of it?"

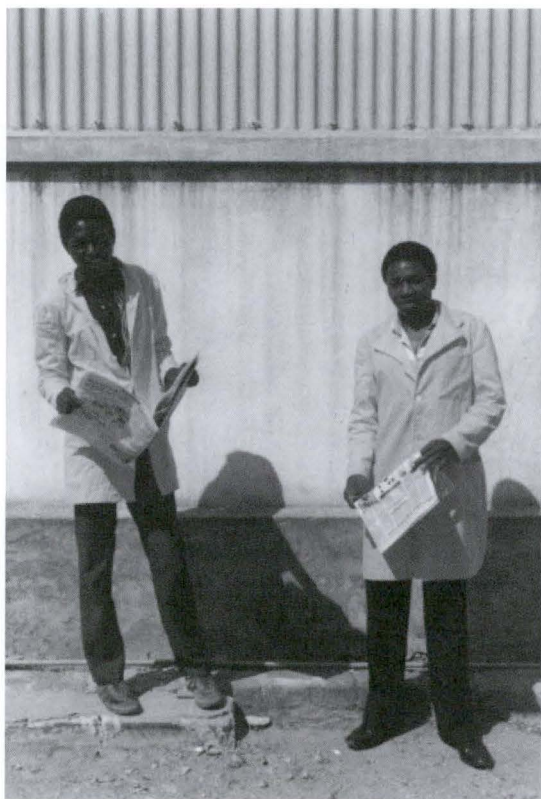
"Everywhere. Government policy is to stamp it out. Good luck!"

I feel uneasy that we will lose our place in line by not sitting on the chairs, but Dibs reassures me with a Greek-like forbearance ("*Endaksi! Endaksi!* Take it easy!"). "Everybody knows who came after whom, " he says.

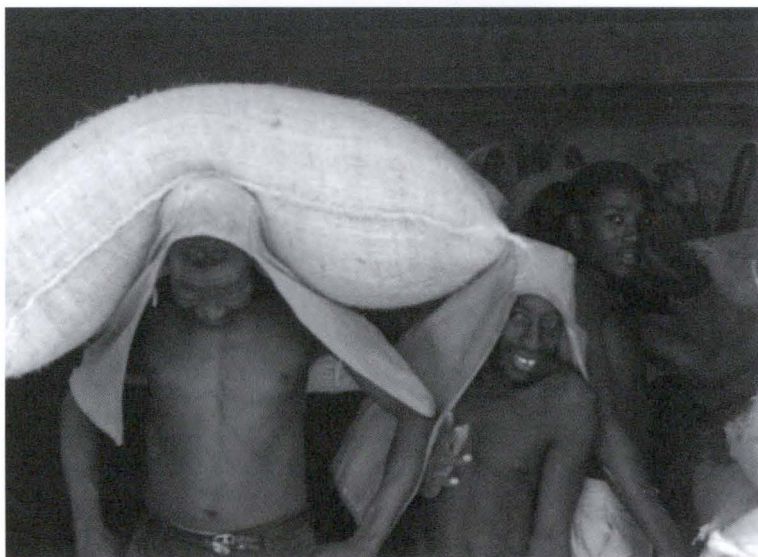
A short while later, it's our turn in the office, and Dibs asks for 24 bags of white maize. No problem. He pays cash for it, counting out the notes, then handing them to the manager, then watching as he counts them again. He gets his change, and we take the stamped form over to the huge cement and iron storage shed. But the whole place is empty, except for a few bags of rice in a low pile along an end wall.

"Might as well take a couple of bags of rice while we have the chance," Dibs says.

We walk through the echoing shed and outside, looking for the maize, looking for a foreman. He is at the railway siding, supervising a crew of half a dozen shirtless and sweating labourers loading sacks directly from a rail car into a lorry, a sort of hand-to-mouth operation. He looks at the paper and tells Dibs it needs a signature from one of the store clerks. He points to two young men standing together in the sun, wearing yellow cotton coats. After the paper is signed, I ask the clerks if I may take their picture, and I promise to send copies from Canada. They agree, but ask me to wait, and they go off to the office and come back with newspapers. I take their picture, against the wall of the shed, looking up from reading their papers with pleasant smiles. There is no self-consciousness or embarrassment about this posing: These men have been to school. They hold jobs requiring literacy, and they're damned proud of it.



The foreman now gets in on the act and invites me to take pictures of the men carrying sacks. It becomes a minor collective drama, the significance of which is not immediately clear to me. One man walks towards me balancing a sack across his shoulders, no hands. His neck is bent far forward to accommodate the load, but he manages to lift his eyes to the camera and achieves a look of calm pride. The foreman, in camouflage cap, acts out his role, looking at the labourer and giving an instruction. Another labourer, in blue Adidas shorts, smiles into the camera. Two men in floral shirts watch from the distant entrance to the shed.



I step into the railcar being unloaded and shoot a group of five: one to the left, waiting and biting his lip; one doing all the work, posing with a sack on his neck, hands on hips, deep frown lines as he tries to raise his eyes; one (who looks Nandi to me, from the North) with a piece of sacking on his head, beaming — perhaps even clowning — and pushing the other fellow's sacking out of the way; finally, two in the background, a pleasant young man looking into the camera with an open face, and another quite obscured but lifting his right hand in a wave, to the world? To Canada?



Lastly, I shoot the Toyota being loaded. The foreman and one of the clerks write their names and addresses in my notebook. (Months later, when I send the pictures, I get a long letter back, praising my honesty and requesting money for school fees. The stamps alone represent a labourer's daily wage.)

Off we go with the first load. Dibs stops where there's a good shot of the skyline of the Kilima Kiu hills and gets interested in the photography. "That would make a good shot," he says, stopping and pointing to one of Anne Joyce's big Boran cows, which is lying under a thorn tree chewing the cud. I hand him the camera. At former Wilson's *Kilima Kiu* farm, he pulls over and stands pointing at the old house while I take the picture.

As we're driving on, Dibs suddenly remarks, "I quite enjoyed your book *Chameleon*. The only thing I didn't understand is, why did you lower the call-up age?"

"Sixteen?"

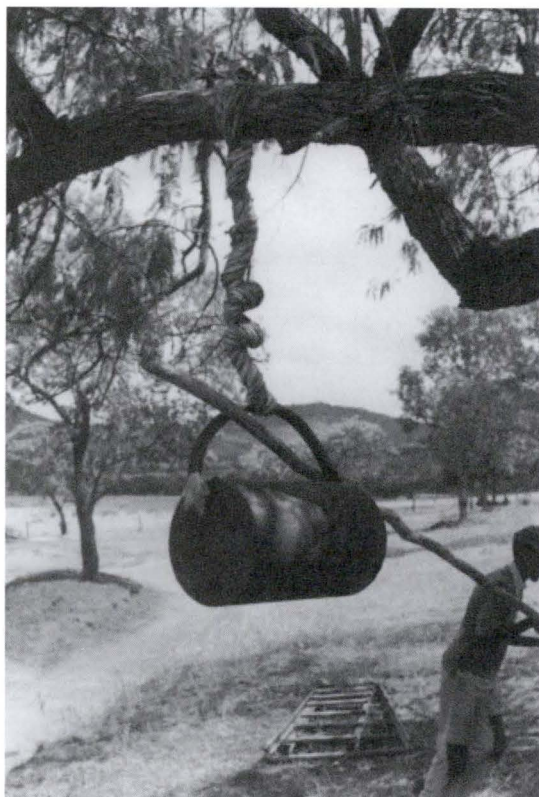
"No, eighteen."

"But at the start of the Emergency, didn't they lower it to sixteen?"

"Never. It was always eighteen. I thought you probably changed it just to make a better story." He grins.

Damn it! Obviously it made it a worse story for him, nagging at his attention. Such details are very important, even in fiction. I remember reading one of Robert Ruark's Kenya books, and suddenly being disgusted, because he takes liberties with geography. His characters have lunch in Nyeri and afternoon tea beside Lake Naivasha, which would have required an airplane, not the Land Rover they were in.

Right above the corner fencepost of "Yoani," we pass a lorry park with a collection of stores and bars and other grubby facilities, where the drivers stop during the overnight curfew on lorry travel, imposed to cut down the movement of contraband. Dibs talks about drunks and prostitutes, incidents where large building stones have been placed across the main Nairobi-Mombasa road at night, and motorists robbed at gunpoint. "It worries me, all this liquor and shady types, but there's nothing I can do about it."



While the first eight bags of *posho* are being unloaded from the Toyota at the farm store, I notice a labourer performing some strange task a few metres away, pushing round and round under a large tree. I go to investigate. Suspended from an overhanging branch is a multiple loop of leather thongs, attached to a cylindrical metal weight about the size of a garden roller. A five-metre sapling pole is being used to twist this object, as the labourer strains round and round, winding the leather thongs up, stretching them. I ask him what he's doing, and he says he's softening the leather. When he's wound it up tight, he pulls the pole out and the contraption spins fast and then slower as it unwinds down to the ground. Then he inserts the pole again, and recommences his circular walk. I recognize the leather: some time in the past four days, Dibs took a sharp knife and bent over an eland skin that was pegged out for

curing on a plywood board, walking backwards and cutting the whole thing into one continuous strip, about 4 cm wide. After curing and cutting, the leather now has to be oiled and stretched, and becomes a *reim*, the leather strap used by South African farmers through the past two centuries for a multitude of applications. In the West, a farmer needing rope goes to the hardware store and buys polypropylene or nylon line cheaply, to suit the task. Here at *Yoani*, the skin of an eland found dead on the farm is carefully cured and cut, and a man put to Sisyphean donkey work at minimum wage for a day, to produce a *reim* out of it. My political analysis cannot find fault with this: it seems like a good idea, environmentally and humanly (always pending the people's revolution, of course).

Robin is waiting to take me up to lunch with him and Mo. I drive him up in the Datsun, but before we leave the lower house, Dibs leans in the passenger window and says, "Pop, how can we store all this *posho* I'm bringing in so nobody could steal it? Give that some thought, would you?"

"Yeah," Robin grunts his understanding. I back out, and as I drive him up on the narrow farm road I see he's quite awake and lost in contemplation of the problem.

Mo hears us coming and is waiting at the back door, hands clasped across her waist and a big smile of welcome. She sits us down. There's fish for lunch, but Robin just picks at his.

"At least eat the salad," Mo chides him, and he takes his fork to it once or twice, but is preoccupied with the *posho* problem.

I tell Mo about the water thieves this morning up behind her house, and she listens for a minute, eating, then launches into a vehement support of the thieves. "*I'd do it too!*" she says emphatically. "*Drinking water for the children and the families?* I understand Dibs' point of view, but by golly I'd *steal* it if I was in their position!" This is the godmother that I love so well. She taught me basic human compassion, despite her bluster and confusion. It is her bluster that remains unforgettably in my memory, her agitation against perceived injustices. A proud and forthright woman, subservient to nobody, whom the times and the fates put in a lonely and difficult role that she had to figure out for herself (without even a phone), and it did



involve the contradiction of living at a Western standard, amidst people who were just barely subsisting. She absorbed the contradiction without losing her compassion and without false guilt. She blustered on, making homes wherever they were — beginning in a mud hut in Kakemega, and now in this brick house where she sleeps locked in at night at her son's insistence, behind steel bars against bandits with Kalashnikovs.

"Tell Bill about Top Secret 70, dear," says Robin after lunch.

"Oh! He doesn't want to waste his time with that!"

I protest that I do, so she fetches some snapshots of the surprise party they held to celebrate her 70<sup>th</sup>. It's all so typical of their generation: a large surprise party arranged under her nose in absolute secrecy, with dozens of people arriving at the farm. Although it's been fifteen years, she remembers the event with great clarity, and shows me snaps of my stepmother, Helen, and my little brothers, Geoffrey and John, who had the job of cajoling her away to Kima Station to look at the train engine accident, while the rest of them hastily made preparations for the party.

Here's my father grinning, the light sparkling off his glasses and the gold in his left incisor tooth. I can practically hear him laugh.

Here's Mo, walking in a throng of people beside the house, absolutely thrilled by all the attention and the surprise — a thrill that's been relived many times. Obviously "Top Secret 70" was one of *the* events of her life. I try to imagine what it must be like to think back fifteen years to when you were only 70.

While Mo has been showing me the pictures, old Robin is in his own world. Occasionally he opens his mouth and stares towards her, as though he's about to correct her. She ignores him or, if he is bothersome, she tells him to be quiet. He turns and winks at me and evokes something I had forgotten: Uncle Robin the trickster. He waits for Mo to close her photo album, and leaning over to me he says quietly, "Did I tell you about . . . the last word?"

"No, Uncle Rob."

"What's that? *What is he saying?* What are you *telling* him?" Mo won't have this (any more than she would have nurse probationers acting up when she was a hospital Matron, before she got married).

Rob sinks back into his chair with a sigh of resignation.

"Oh, never mind," he says to the table.

"What was he *telling* you?" Mo demands of me.

I'm caught between them, but I don't feel too uncomfortable, as Rob seems to have drifted off in defeat. His dim eyes are closed, and he is breathing raspily through his mouth.

"Uncle Robin was asking if he'd told me about the last word."

"Oh! You and your nonsense!" she scolds him. Turning to me, she explains, "He claims that I always have to have the last word in every conversation. Perfect rot!"

In the silence that follows, a smile slowly creeps over the old man's face. He opens an eye, and looks at me to see if I have understood how he manipulated the situation.

It's a touching moment, sad in a way but very funny too. He's always been a joker, and here he is in his frailty, still managing to pull off a trick he must have played on her dozens of times. He takes a childlike pleasure in his success. Seeing that I have understood, he shares the moment with me, smiling, and holding his mouth open in a silent laugh.

Next day I take my camera up the hill to lunch with them. I've shown Mo pictures of my family in Vancouver, and she's impressed with the quality of the snaps and has asked me to come and take pictures of her two Pekingese. After lunch, she takes the little dogs under her arms and sits outside on the garden steps. She smiles sweetly, a wonderful picture of Mo, but not good of the dogs. Their faces are too up and down and the midday sun leaves them shadowed. I pose the dogs on a chair on the verandah, to diffuse the light on their faces, and take a full closeup. Then I ask her if she would mind me taking a picture of the three silver drinking cups, which figure prominently in my book of stories. They are emblems of successful farming in Africa, trophies from the Bergville, Natal, Fat Stock Shows in the late 1920s and 30s.

She's all for it.

"Take them over by the window," she says, "so that you can get a good view of them."

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

CAROLINE BERGVALL is a French-Norwegian poet, critic, and performance artist based in London, England. Her most recent collection of poetic and performance pieces, *FIG* (Goan Atom, 2), was published by Salt Books in 2005. Collaborative performances with sound artists include, most recently, the installation *Little Sugar* for TEXT Festival (Bury, 2005) and *Say: "Parsley"* at the Liverpool Biennial (2004). A CD of readings and audiotexts, *Via: poems 1994 – 2004* (Rockdrill 8), is available from Carcanet. Her criticism focuses on emerging forms of writing, plurilingual poetry, and mixed media writing practices. She is co-chair of the MFA Writing Faculty, Milton Avery School of the Arts, Bard College, and Research Fellow at Dartington College of Arts in Devon, UK.

ANDREA BRADY is a poet based in London where she lectures in Renaissance literature at Brunel University. She also runs Barque Press ([www.barquepress.com](http://www.barquepress.com)). Her publications include *Embrace* (Glasgow: Object Permanence, 2005) and *Vacation of a Lifetime* (Cambridge: Salt, 2001).

Writer and filmmaker COLIN BROWNE is completing a new book entitled *The Shovel*. His most recent book, *Ground Water* (Talonbooks), was nominated for a Governor General's award in 2005. His most recent film, *Linton Garner: I Never Said Goodbye*, premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival and on CBC's *Opening Night*. He lives and teaches in Vancouver and is working on two new film projects.

TED BYRNE is a member of the Kootenay School of Writing collective. He works at the Trade Union Research Bureau in Vancouver.

WAYDE COMPTON's most recent book is *Performance Bond* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004). Outside of the book, he collaborates with Jason de Coute in an ongoing sound-poetry performance project using multiple turntables and records. Compton teaches English literature and composition at Coquitlam College and is a creative writing instructor in Simon Fraser University's Writing and Publishing Program.

MICHELE LEGGOTT's most recent book of poetry is *Milk and Honey* published by Auckland UP in 2005. It is Leggott's fifth book of poetry. Her acclaimed critical work *Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers* was published by Johns Hopkins UP in 1989. *Jacket 27* includes Leggott's "Journey to Portugal" (April 2005) arising from her visit to the University of Coimbra International Poetry Festival in 2004. A major project since 2001 has been Leggott's development of the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre ([www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz)) at the University of Auckland.

D.S. MARRIOTT teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is the author of several chapbooks of poetry, including *Lative* (1992) and *Dogma* (2001), and the critical monograph, *On Black Men* (2000). The poems published here are taken from *Incognegro*, a work in progress.

ERÍN MOURE is a Montréal poet and translator. Her most recent book is *Little Theatres* (Anansi, 2005). Her next book, *O Cadoiro*, will appear in 2007 from the same press. Her selection from Chus Pato's *m-Talá* appeared in English as a chapbook published by Nomados, Vancouver, 2002. A long awaited re-issue of her UK chapbook *Quasi Flanders, Quasi Extramadura* — the work of Chilean poet Andrés Ajens — will appear from Left Hand Books in Victoria, 2006.

CHUS PATO lives in Lalín, Galicia where she teaches history and geography at a local college and is active in the nationalist cultural group Redes Escarlata. Her work has been translated from Galician into German, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Lithuanian, and English. She has published seven books of poetry and is working on her

eighth, *Thermidor*; a selected poems has appeared in Spanish translation; and an excerpt from her *m-Talá* was published in translation by Nomados, 2002. Her English-language translator and big fan, Erín Moure, hopes to find publishers for her books in North America. In Pato's words, "writing metabolizes the world, even the world that cannot be absorbed into writing."

JENNY PENBERTHY is the new editor of *TCR*. She teaches at Capilano College. Her most recent books include editions of Lorine Niedecker's *New Goose* (Listening Chamber, 2003) and *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (U of California P, 2002). In 1996 she edited "Making New: a Selection of Recent South African Writing" for *West Coast Line*.

BILL SCHERMBRUCKER, a former editor of *TCR*, was born in Kenya and now lives on Saturna Island, suspended between life, fiction, and history. His novel *Crossing Second Narrows*, a fictionalized account of the founding of Capilano College and the campus war at Simon Fraser University, is due out from Cormorant in 2008. His latest publications are *Saturna in the 1920s* (2002) and *Campbells Of Saturna* (2005), oral histories produced for the Saturna Community Club.

RUTH SCHEUING is an artist who works in textiles with a special interest in weaving as myth and metaphor and as a woman's language. Her works have been exhibited internationally and she has co-edited a book of essays: *material matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*. She teaches in the Textile Arts Program at Capilano College.