

Lukas Bärfuss, *Hundred Days*

*Translated by Ruth Franklin*

pp. 14-43

At first I kept the shutters closed during the day, but then Théoneste informed me that the militias had long known an *Umuzungu* [white man] was holed up in the house. He had told them I was Swiss, and thus on their side. Had I been Belgian, they would have had no qualms about beating me to death. But these murderers who would kill anyone with the wrong three entries crossed out under *Ubwoko* on their identity cards—they took me for an ally of their cause, a fellow worker, like all the Swiss during the thirty years since our arrival in that country. Why should anything have changed just because they were now hacking off women’s breasts and cutting unborn children out of their mothers’ bodies? In the end, we were the ones who had given them their government and provided them with the skills necessary to tackle any large problem. Whether they were carting off bricks or corpses, it was all the same. So they left me in peace.

I don’t know if I ever loved Agathe. Perhaps I had spent the four years that I knew her just trying to forget our first meeting—to undo the injury she had inflicted upon me then, at the airport in Brussels. To convince her that I was not the stupid boy she had taken me for when I spoke up in her defense at the passport control.

It was the end of June, 1990. I was taking my first journey by plane, en route to start my post with the administration in Kigali, where they were expecting me. My predecessor had left things in considerable disarray; a pile of work was supposedly waiting. I was traveling on an official mission. I felt important. But when I had to transfer to Sabena after my flight from Zürich, I was obliged to go through the Belgian passport control. There she stood. I had not often seen an African woman wearing European clothing: capri pants that showed off her slender ankles, open shoes, red-lacquered toenails. Beneath her arm she carried a jaunty parasol with a handle in the shape of a duck’s head. There was a problem with her papers. That is, her passport was completely in order, as I later learned; the problem was her nationality. The Belgian customs officers were harassing her simply because she was a citizen of a former colony. They leafed through her papers again and again, pestering her with questions. One of the two, with thick

stripes on his uniform and the face of a drunk, disappeared for several long minutes. The other people waiting had long since moved to another line. Only I remained, and I stayed there, not moving, because I had no intention of abandoning this woman to those monsters. She herself appeared calm and unaffected by the trouble, but as the minutes went by I began to seethe. And while I was still debating whether it might not be better to remain behind the line, as the markings on the floor ordered me to do, the remaining customs officer let loose with a vile expression from the language of the Portuguese slave-traders, a curse word that equated identity with skin pigment. I had learned its origin and meaning less than a month earlier in a language course for travelers, during the unit on intercultural communication.

In my mind's eye there appeared the three death's-heads with which this term had been demarcated on the worksheet, to demonstrate its complete unsuitability to the vocabulary of an employee in the office for collaborative development work and humanitarian aid.

And so the grounds for war were established; the yellow line became a Rubicon, which I crossed without the slightest hesitation. I would make that racist idiot realize that a new day had dawned. Thirty years on, these monsters in gray uniforms had still not gotten over the loss of their colonies. I had heard about their museum in Tervuren, outside Brussels—built by Leopold II, the father of all racist monsters—where they unabashedly paid tribute to the crimes of the Force Publique, recognized the assassin Stanley as a great man, and displayed the trunks from their journeys to the Congo as reliquaries in a heroes' cabinet. So much they could do, but they had to recognize that the world's conscience had turned against them; and I fear I hurled a few curses in our mother tongue in their direction.

Instantly I was seized by two security officers I had not previously noticed, who carried me off. This was painful enough at the time, but over the coming days and weeks it went so far as to rob me of my *joie de vivre* and finally even to endanger my mission. To be honest, what cast a shadow over the four years I spent in Kigali was not this rude treatment, not the brutality with which the men dragged me off to a far corner of the airport. It was the face of the beautiful African woman for whose sake I had gotten myself into this mess—freckles sprinkled around the nose, bright gray eyes, brows curved like two bass clefs. I looked into

her face for no more than a second, and for the first quarter of this very long second I could not read her expression—her gaze was just as indifferent as before. In the second quarter she broke into a wide, proud smile, full of contempt for the world, which encouraged me and gave me strength. With a single glance I wanted to show her that she need not worry; even if they led me to the executioner, the defense of human dignity would be worth ten times the sacrifice.

But I misinterpreted something in this look, because the two final quarters of this second revealed what the woman was truly thinking. Her contempt was directed not at the world, but at me alone. And to make this clear, she pressed her tongue against her upper row of teeth, creating a hollow below the roof of her mouth, and simultaneously sucked in air. The result was a loud tongue-click, the international sound of disapproval. She took *me* for the idiot, not the customs officers, who had noticed her disparaging sneer and were smirking as if I were the ultimate imbecile. Even the duck's head on her parasol mocked me. And then, as the other travelers gawked, I was dragged through the security barrier.

They threw me into a cell the size of a hand towel, a booth with two chairs and a table. I was sweating with agitation. Never in my life had I experienced a greater injustice. Moreover, my suitcase was gone. But once I had calmed down somewhat, I told myself that the matter would surely be resolved soon. I wasn't just any traveler; I was an employee of the foreign service, of the government, an administrator traveling on an official mission. And I had time; my connecting flight would not take off for two hours.

But no one came to whom I could explain myself. No official appeared—not after an hour, nor an hour and a half. Not until the time for my flight had come and gone did I discover that the door to my cell had no lock. I pushed the handle, the door opened, and before me, like a faithful dog, stood my brown suitcase. I stepped out into the corridor; no one was to be seen, and I headed towards a glass door, which led outside. Now I stood in an employees' parking lot at Brussels Airport, a Sabena plane roared into the sky above me, and I realized that I needed diplomatic assistance.

A taxi brought me to the Swiss mission, where I was attended by the embassy counselor, a well-groomed man who bared his large teeth in a smile at the end of each sentence. This was hardly the end of the world, he assured me, nor the end

of my career. He gave me enough cash to tide me over for a few days, until the next flight to Kigali, and booked a modest hotel room for me. He would brief my colleagues in Kigali first thing Monday morning. The man was kind enough to offer me some tips on the tourist attractions, but I had no desire to see the Atomium or the Royal Museums of Fine Arts.

The chafing on my upper arms healed quickly, but the dent this woman had made in my soul ached for a long time. I was twenty-four years old, and I had read the Négritude writers, Césaire and Senghor and all the rest of them. My bible was Haley's *Roots*, a book about the author's search for his forefathers, who had been carted off as slaves from Gambia to North America. I felt the pain of those uprooted people; with them I suffered their enslavement, the myriad varieties of oppression. My reading had shown me why one must be eternally vigilant, and never wait to act on moral courage until the right moment arrives. Moral courage is demanded *at once*, in the moment of the injustice, and a single person's cowardice can contaminate the whole world. I believed this with every fiber of my being, but what were these ideals good for when the weak would not allow themselves to be helped and rejected the hand that I extended towards them?

I spent the next week in my hotel room, agonizing over my future, leaving only to grab a hurried meal at the corner restaurant. I still remember well the bath I took that first evening to wash the shame I had endured from my body. Why not just let those Africans lie in their own shit, and instead look for somebody who would appreciate my service? In Eastern Europe just then empires were crumbling like houses of cards. And why? Because people were rebelling. Because they were not quiet. Anyone who did not rise up against injustice deserved injustice—that was my conviction, and as the scornful tongue-click reverberated in my head, I became ever more certain of it. My idealism had been crushed by the first tart who came along. What would it have cost her to give me a small sign, a tiny gesture of appreciation? As soon as she spotted someone weaker, she took the side of the strong, the side of the oppressor. Because of her I was stuck here—in a hostile city, in a decrepit, dilapidated neighborhood reeking of cooking fat, in a lousy hotel room, in a lime-streaked bathtub too short for me. I found some consolation by telling myself that she was obviously not a real African. Clearly she had been adopted by some interior designer who wanted a chocolate-brown baby to adorn his space. She could hardly be blamed for lacking social awareness: like every pariah turned parvenu, she denied her origins, and at the

very moment that she accepted being called a nigger, she lost all self-respect. As I pulled the bathtub stopper, I saw her face before me, a haplessly beautiful face, and in my thoughts I cursed her, first ashamedly, then louder, until my lips formed the word, still without breath, and finally I dared to voice it. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger.

David repeated the ugly word as if it were an incantation; he bowed over the table, then leaned back again. In the wan, ever scarcer light of the room, he was a gray figure, pale and colorless; it was not hard to imagine him in that bathtub, shivering, alone, wounded.

I was saved by the World Cup, which was taking place just then in Italy—by the indomitable Lions from Cameroon, to be exact. They had beaten Argentina in the opening game and then gone on to the group stage. And shortly before I flew out, they threw Colombia out of the tournament during the round of sixteen. In the Brussels hotel room that week I watched many of the games, but I anticipated none so eagerly as the quarter-final of Cameroon against England. The Africans led for most of the game, losing in overtime on a mere penalty kick. I could have jumped out the window. Once again the white masters left the field as victors, leaving the eternal have-nots with only the dignity of losing well. But at the same time my disappointment was also my salvation, since it proved that my sympathy for the right side—that is, for the underdog—remained intact. I decided to let the incident at the airport rest, not to blame the entire dark continent for one woman's vile behavior, and to give the Africans a second chance.

Had I been smart enough, I would have learned my lesson and questioned my ideals, as well as the reasons why I wanted to dedicate myself to this work in the first place. But I was stupid, I was blind, I saw only what I wanted to see. More than anything else, I had the childlike desire to dedicate my life to a cause greater than myself.

A year before my departure, the storms of global politics had sent a few squalls into our country. I joined the demonstrations, carrying banners and shouting slogans, but after just a few weeks the protests waned, and the blight of the established order settled upon us again. I'd had enough of my country and its small-minded, notoriously negligent politicians, but to me life was too precious to hole myself up like most of my friends, grow my hair long, and print

revolutionary pamphlets in some crowded stable. Still, it would be a shame to cross over to the other side and become an ordinary office worker, amassing and overseeing my portion of the wealth just to stuff my own gullet. I had no desire to perish as cannon fodder in the trenches of capitalism; if I was going to sacrifice myself, it would have to be for a great cause. And so I had to get out of there. My country didn't need me, but in Africa merely a thousandth of my modest knowledge would amount to riches. And I wanted to share it.

So I continued my interrupted trip and arrived in Kigali. It was evening; the first thing I noticed was the smell of wood fires, and the soot. We crossed the airfield on foot, then entered a sparsely lit airport. I was a bit anxious as I stepped up to the customs clearance, fearing that the Belgians had briefed their colleagues in Kigali. But all went smoothly, I had my suitcase within a few minutes, and it was not long before I discovered in the arrivals hall a man holding a sign with my name. As I approached him, it struck me that he was too old to have such long hair, which he had tied into a ponytail; too old for the coral necklace around his neck; too old and too heavyset for his tight leather pants.

He introduced himself as Missland and welcomed me to the "Crown Colony," which he said with a big grin. Then we drove down a dark street towards Kigali. He was silent, asked no questions, and seemed to be preoccupied with his own thoughts. The car was filled with the scent of his aftershave and of the throat lozenges that he was continually sucking. After half an hour he stopped in front of the Presbyterians' hostel, where I was to stay for the next few days, until the regular accommodations had been cleansed of my predecessor's traces. The ground-level room lay at the end of an open hall. The furnishings were simple, cloister-like, suitable to a Christian hostel. There was a chair, a table, a cupboard; a neon light buzzed on the ceiling—that was all. Missland handed me a few papers, a city map and a note explaining how to get to the embassy, then excused himself brusquely.

The proprietress offered me plantains, a dish I had never eaten before, and a dry goat kebab, which I washed down with strong tea. Beer and other alcoholic drinks were not permitted in this hostel, but the woman told me that down the street there was a pub—a good opportunity to get a feel for the local atmosphere. The gently sloping street was dark, and at the end I could see a colorful glow,

which I took to be the tavern's sign. A dog barked; the sound was deep and angry, and I thought it might be better to leave the pub visit for another day and go back to my room.

Sleep was a long time coming: I was too agitated, and my mind felt as if it were still somewhere over the Sahara. And whenever I briefly dozed off, I was awakened by the power unit behind the house, which would kick on every few minutes and then fall silent again, jarring me out of troubled dreams in which grinning duck's heads played a major role.

I had resolved to forget about the incident in Brussels, but the wound remained, and the life that awaited me in Kigali did a poor job of taking my mind off it. I had envisioned great adventures, imagining that every day I would have to contend with the worst human misery, but actually my work consisted of updating address lists, typing project proposals, ordering printing materials and stamp pads, or stuffing envelopes for the annual "Development Day" reception. During the day, I was seldom aware that our latitude was just two degrees south of the equator. The former embassy building, in which the administration's coordination office was housed, was like a terrarium, a cube where the conditions of home were artificially simulated. Heavy drapes filtered the tropical sun, and I often had the feeling that I was sitting in my grandmother's parlor: until her death, she had lived in the Oberland, in the shadow of a ridge, and saw the sun for less than five months of the year. It was strangely quiet, and anyone who came into the communications office involuntarily lowered his or her voice, as if entering a church or a doctor's waiting room.

During those first few days I once dared to call out a question to "Little Paul," who worked in a room at the other end of the corridor, but no answer came. Instead, his head appeared at my door, red with anger, to inform me that if I wanted to speak to him, I should kindly get my lazy behind in gear and walk over to his desk. If there was a rush, I might also use the telephone; but there was never a rush, as I would soon learn.

It was Paul, deputy coordinator and second in charge in Kigali, who initiated me into the elaborate systems of the official channels, the intricate mysteries of correctly developing an operational procedure, the world of white, blue, and

green copies. And while he was explaining how to set up the correct tab width for a project proposal for the geographical department, I had to hold my breath—not because the work was so thrilling, but so that I could passably share in Paul’s excitement.

The background noise in the coordination office never rose above the level of a Protestant funeral. Even the long-distance radio receiver in the hall, which was the size of an oven, ventured no more than a whisper, the distant voices of Swiss Radio International stripped of all their painful highs and lows by the long-wave transmission. A thick, gray rug, with Bordeaux-red Swiss crosses that dwindled to a point before finally dissolving into the pile, swallowed up any other impertinent noises—the click of a pencil falling onto the Formica top of my desk, or little Paul’s sneezing, which he did as often as fifty times a day. The deputy could not tolerate the air-conditioning and often caught cold; and because he was a considerate person, he sneezed with his mouth closed, burying his face in the crook of his arm. Promptly at 2 p.m. the radio would pause, and then for hours Paul’s embarrassed wheezing would be the only sign that I was not alone. Then the embassy felt like a refrigerated mausoleum in which all life had come to a halt. Sometimes I could not even hear the laughter of the woman in the main hall—a single, long-drawn-out vowel between A and O, which sounded almost resigned, as if the woman laughing had long since accepted the hopeless comedy of the latest disastrous visa-seeker to appear at her counter, who in 98 of 100 cases would be rejected. Then I would stand up carefully from my chair and creep over to Paul’s office. The dwarfish man would be bent over some papers, his womanish reading glasses atop his nose, the desk lamp so close to the back of his head that the slightest movement would cause him to bump into it. I would wait until Little Paul made some movement—pushed his glasses back up his nose, played with the golden crucifix around his neck, turned over a page—to demonstrate that time had not come to a standstill. Then I could safely return to my chair and examine the damp crescents that would form under my skin and disappear when I raised my arms.

After quitting time, at five o’clock, I had only an hour of daylight left to look around Kigali. I would watch the bustle on the Avenue de la Paix or drink banana soda in Le Palmier ... the city did not have much more to offer. Kigali was a backwater: sleepy, orderly, tidy, boring. The first Minister Resident of the German colonial power, a man named Kandt, had founded it eighty years earlier,

geographically in the middle of the former kingdom, not far from the ford in Nyabarango through which the Duke of Mecklenburg and Count von Götzen had arrived in the country a few centuries earlier, the first whites. The settlement lay at the intersection of four roads, which ran from Uganda in the east to the Congo and from the lowlands of the south to the highlands in the north, and for this reason Kigali soon became the most important trading post in the country.

Merchants from India and from the Arabian peninsula set up shop and sold their wares. German, French, Belgian trade firms set up branches; a regiment of Askaris, black soldiers from the coast of the Indian Ocean, protected the European masters. Within a few years it looked as if the settlement would blossom into the first real city in a country where previously only villages had been scattered atop the hills.

After the Germans lost the war in Europe and the Belgians took over their portion of the colonial assets, things started to go downhill for Kigali. The new masters were suspicious of that larger city, which they believed to comprise only strongholds of depravity and breeding grounds for unrest. They divided and conquered, backing the old monarchy and the Mwami kings, who lived far from Kigali and had seen their influence shrink with the development of the new city. The Belgians had their own capital, Astrida, which now is called Butare, and only after the Revolution of 1961, in which the monarchy was deposed and the Belgians were driven out, did Kigali experience a rebound. The young republic needed a new capital that was not bound up with the old ruling cliques, and the eastern slope of the central hill, called Nyarugenge, was rebuilt. Street after street was paved and lit. Since no land had been designated for the poor people who were streaming into the city from all sides, ad hoc settlements sprang up in the marshy hollows. The narrow valleys were cultivated and provided the residents with manioc, bananas, beans, and coffee. From the marshes they brought clay to build their huts and papyrus for the roofs. But the country had no real slums. All in all, Kigali was a peaceful town, safer than most European cities, its streets neatly swept and shaded by rosewood trees. And thus it was horribly boring. There were no public cinemas, no theaters, no concerts. The people here seemed not to need any diversion; on the contrary, they enjoyed the uneventful days, and the less that happened, the better.

Only Saturdays brought some variety. Then I would roam around Kyovou, the diplomats' and ministry officials' quarter, circle the city center, and head southward until I got to the mosques. In the Islamic quarter I would buy a meat dish from one of the stalls, wash it down with a beer, and lose myself in the bustle in front of the Regional Stadium. Sometimes I would leave the tarry streets behind me, climb up one of the hills, and slip away into the countryside.

All the crops grew in wild disarray: banana shrubs near fir-green manioc; stalks of millet (here called sorghum) as tall as a man; avocado trees among isolated coffee bushes, as they must once have been in the Garden of Eden. I liked following the narrow paths that snaked through the plantings, connecting the simple manure-plastered brick huts. A plant known as *Miatsi*, with pencil-thick stalks that seemed to have once grown underwater, encircled the courtyards. Then the path led through a grove of eucalyptus trees and pines, their needles hanging from the branches like long eyelashes. Flowers with deep-violet blossoms covered the ground. It felt as if I were being watched by a thousand cat's eyes, and then all at once shapes would emerge from the trees, soundless, creeping, timid. Faces became distinct, and I would suddenly be surrounded by children—half-naked boys in tattered pants, girls in shirts stiff with dirt. Hill-dwellers, their skin dyed by the red earth, they would hang back, shy, but at an unidentifiable signal they would discard their fear and rush joyfully at the white man, shrieking *Umuzungu! Umuzungu!*, tearing at my pants, winding around my legs. The commotion would attract more children; they emerged by the dozen from the fields, and suddenly they were no longer children, but gnomes or mountain spirits, and I couldn't tell if they were well-disposed towards me or wanted to tear me to shreds, which would have been nothing for them. The little imps smelled of life among cow dung and sour milk, and I thought it might not be unpleasant to become one of them, to have my skin turn black and my hair frizz, to recognize my name but no longer know how to write it, and instead to recite the secret names of each of these plants, *Imhati*, *Amateshe*, *Bicatsi* and *Amatunda*. And the bitter smell would linger in my nose no longer, because I would smell of it myself: of fields, milk, cattle.

My first few weeks in Kigali happened to be during the end of the good old days, the last moments of peace, and peace is always characterized by boredom. It took less than three months for everything to turn upside-down, for the monster to be

revealed behind the mask of normality. But in the administration there was still little sense of the impending catastrophe—at the most, a slight disquiet that hardly posed a threat to our projects. The decline in the price of coffee concerned us most. The Americans had terminated the international export treaty; during the Cold War they had kept prices high to prevent the coffee farmers from turning to the Communists, but now there were no more Communists, and the Americans had lost interest in artificial price supports. During the March before my arrival, the export cooperative had received ninety cents for each pound of Arabica. One month later, in April, the price was down to seventy cents. Up till October it seemed to rally somewhat, but then, at exactly the moment when the rebels attacked, it plunged into the abyss. At the end of the year, the farmers were earning half as much as they had in January, a ludicrous 47 cents, and little by little everything went to the dogs—first the farmers, then the roasters, and finally the export companies. And what, pray tell, made up this country's economy? Thirty-five thousand tons of coffee. Oh, and a few tea bushes.

The price did not recover—not in January, not in February, not in March. We were glad about the measly five-cent rise in April; the price sank no lower and over the course of the next year leveled off to a half-dollar. The administration paid the farmers fifty million in price supports. But it didn't help. The government had no income, and slowly it ran out of money, that sedative for all unhappiness. The officials began to look around for new sources of income. He who pays the piper calls the tune, as the saying goes, and when the president stopped paying, the pipers began to play on their own. From Gishwati we heard that the farmers were tearing out their coffee bushes and putting in plantains. They would always be able to sell the beer, and most importantly, the taxes were not as high as the ones on coffee.

Time was against us, and each day brought us closer to the catastrophe, but for me things were gradually improving.

I had stayed in the Presbyterian hostel for more than two weeks, longer than originally planned. Supposedly we were waiting for paint to arrive from Switzerland, but I had understood the delay as a test in frustration tolerance. This phrase, which was used often in the administration, was an essential attribute of the successful official into which I was meant to be shaped.

“Accommodations”—that was the word used by Marianne, the coordinator, not “apartment” or even “house,” and I was expecting a hole somewhere on the city’s outskirts, or at best a studio in one of the rundown apartment buildings by the main market, the only bad neighborhood in Kigali, frequented by fellows with red eyes and bad teeth. I inwardly prepared myself for a further exercise in humility, a lesson that would erase the last traces of arrogance from my spoiled European heart; and as Little Paul led me into Amsar House, I thought at first that someone was playing a trick on me. It was the most enchanting place ever inhabited by any member of my family, a chalk-white, single-story house with four rooms and a veranda that looked out over the garden—although the word “garden” hardly suffices to describe this colorful sea of Mexican flame bushes, crowns of thorns, and wandering roses. A coral tree formed a canopy over half the plot; a four-meter-high wall, fortified with bits of pottery, surrounded the entire yard. And still more: in the driveway stood my official car, a Toyota Corolla, well used and with a few small dents, but no matter—now I had a car. All these privileges embarrassed me a bit; I didn’t know what I had done to deserve them. But as I later learned, Amsar House was not intended to honor me personally. It would have been impossible for an international organization to find modest accommodations in Kigali; no one would have dared to sell a house to a European without the approval of certain groups. Many had grown rich off equipping foreigners with cars, clothing, office furniture, security technology; and naturally these were always the same ones—the *Abakonde*, people from the north—who had been in charge since the military coup 17 years ago.

My diffidence would not last long; the administration knew how to make a man feel suited to his position. Because I wanted to prove myself worthy of the house and car, I took my job more seriously. I became more self-confident, and my tone at work was more polite and more decisive. Whenever I found myself confronted with negligence—the post office had yet again run out of stamps, or a package from the central office had arrived but not yet been delivered—for which the usual excuses had once been acceptable, I would now demand that the situation be immediately rectified. I also placed great emphasis on my appearance, putting on a fresh shirt each morning and shaving carefully. Though the work was still monotonous, I was now conscious of my responsibility. I perceived it not in the work itself, but rather in my privileges. The job came with a house so that I could relax after the workday; I needed to have my own car so as not to wear myself out taking buses and taxis; and all this proved how important my position was.

So that I could better understand the administration's work, I was supposed to have a look at the projects, and for this reason I would accompany Little Paul "into the field," as we would say. It was a small country, so these were short trips; to get to a forestry school by the lake took just a little over three hours. Wherever we went, the locals greeted us with respect, not to say obsequiousness. At Nyamishaba Institute the director presented the senior class. Two dozen short-cropped pupils in blue smocks stood at attention by their desks, their chins lifted. Whoever was called on took a half-step to the side and rattled off a long list of Latin names: *Podocarpus falcatus*, *Magnistipulata butayei*, *Macaranga neomildbraedania*—the holy trinity of cultivated timber. Another boy would add their respective uses in toolmaking or carpentry, a third described their pros and cons—susceptibility to parasites, poor growth, great water-reabsorption. All these phrases were learned by heart, offered up by these blue-aproned acolytes of silviculture, who seemed to be reciting their forestry liturgy without having understood a single word of it. At the conclusion of their demonstration the class shouted at me, "*Muraho, Monsieur l'administrateur, Muraho!*" and I expected they would at least sing the national anthem and hoist the flag, but Little Paul dragged me out to the schoolyard.

From here, one could see all of Lake Kivu. Seagulls circled above us; they disappeared in the whiteness over the waves and re-emerged far below, where they gathered above the fishing boats, shrieking. That's their way of showing gratitude, Little Paul answered, as if he had read the corresponding question in my bemused expression. And they have every reason to be grateful. Suddenly he laid his finger conspiratorially to his pursed lips and looked around to make sure no one was listening. Thirty thousand, he whispered, each of them costs us thirty thousand Swiss francs a year. What I had just seen were the soldiers at the front, because in this country a perpetual battle was being waged over each and every tree. Naturally such soldiers are expensive, he said, but we have no choice. Someone must bring our message up into the hills. Should we allow the farmers to chop down the last remaining forests and sit there on their bare, eroded soil? No, that's impossible; we want to go to heaven in the end, and how will we manage it if not through good deeds? His words sounded like a justification, and I did not understand whom or what he felt compelled to defend the school against until I found out later how deeply the institute was in crisis. Each year it educated

two dozen forestry workers, foresters with diplomas who could then find no work, because in this country there were simply no more forests. No one wanted them—the farmers would rather grow plantains for their home-brewed beer. In the entire country there remained just two large forest regions: the rainforests on the slopes of the Virungas, which were allowed to stand because good money could be made off the gorillas living there, and the Nyungwe, the last remaining primeval forest in the country. This was our main area of battle, since the farmers could not expect to chop down the Nyungwe too and burn up its wood, roasting the chimpanzees.

There are people who prevent them from bringing about their own downfall, said Paul. He wanted me to meet one such hero of development aid, one of our two dozen experts who take care of the scut work out in the field. We drove further into the south, where it became more hilly, and soon emerged amid a group of clove and sausage trees. Two attractive, well-cared-for houses came into view; a red flag bearing the white cross fluttered cheerfully in the breeze. We were received by two children, little blond angels at the edge of the wilderness, their bare feet dirty but their souls unblemished by any harmful influences of civilization. Their father, who was called “the General,” was tending a protective band of spruces and eucalyptus trees that he had personally planted around the virgin forest, supervising a company of front soldiers from the forestry school at Nyamishaba. They had had the Latin name of each and every weed drummed into them, but not the ability to work for even half an hour without oversight, so he could not take his eyes off them for a minute.

His wife took care of the garden, harvested vegetables and potatoes, and raised chickens and rabbits, so that all they had to buy was rice, sugar, cooking fat, and coffee. In the rest of her time she educated the children in a cabin specially outfitted as a schoolroom, teaching them reading, writing, and arithmetic and telling them stories about the mountains and lakes of their homeland, cheap posters of which hung on the wall and which they did not remember. The children’s mother-language was in fact identical to the language of their mother. Their vocabulary, acquired only from their parents, sounded strangely foreign—too adult, too serious, without the silly words children pick up from each other in the street. They answered our questions tersely, precisely, using phrases such as “self-evidently” and “development horizon,” and led us into a fresh clearing, where the general showed us a gash that some miscreants had made in the belt of

stone pines, taking down six or seven of Nyungwe's primeval giants. In their haste they had sawed one of them down but failed to carry it away; it lay there still, and the children clambered up the stump like big-game hunters with a slain elephant. This tree was more than 250 years old, the General said, and it alone had held several hectoliters of water—the farmers had no clue what they were doing with these crimes against the law of the forest. The forest functions like a reservoir, he continued, like a sponge that soaks up water and gives it back to the land bit by bit. Without Nyungwe we would drown like rats, because with each rainfall the rivers would overflow the banks. But how can one explain such things to a farmer whose language has just one word for both the past and the future, not differentiating between what happened yesterday and what could happen tomorrow? They only care about what today brings—and when it brings them wood to burn, then it's a good day.

Night was soon upon us, and we fled to the cabin. In the narrow room we sat down for the evening meal, the boy said grace, and we silently spooned up our soup. A carbide lamp emitted a dim light, and I could see the forester's calloused hands, the cracks lined with dirt; the mother's shirt, ten times mended; the deprivations that manifested as deep creases in their faces. And I thought about Amsar House, about my cushy seat in the administration, my orderly eight-hour day. At that moment I regretted being an office drone, a bureaucrat, far removed from any true challenges, from problems, from everything that was true and hard and required daily, tough work, rather than idealism or grand theories.

After dinner the children excused themselves for the night with a song, the tune Napoleon's soldiers sang as they crossed the Beresina; they sang of a journey not unlike our life, the journey of a wanderer in the night; of heartache on every path, and of the need for courage, because in the morning the friendly sun would rise again. The children kissed their parents twice on the cheek. We remained seated for a while; the woman served coffee so weak that even in the wan light of the carbide lamp, the spoon was visible at the bottom of the thin brew. The General turned the conversation to a man named Goldmann, who worked in the arboretum in Butare as a forestry scientist, hinting that he had gotten into difficulties. When we pressed him, he brought his thumb to his mouth as if it were the neck of a bottle, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. He said no more, too tired to converse, a man who could not sit down for long without falling asleep. Soon he withdrew, and Little Paul and I were alone with the woman. Dog-tired ourselves, we

listened as she told us about her life—haltingly at first, because she seldom spoke with anyone and was out of practice, but each word uttered seemed to loosen another one, as if the sentences were dragging each other out of silence. We listened until long past midnight, learning about her battle against snails the size of fists that ate up the vegetables, the miserable quality of the wares in the food cooperative, the farmers' dissatisfaction over the price of coffee, and so forth. And although our heads nodded with fatigue, we remained seated, almost duty-bound; in any case it seemed selfish for us to insist upon our sleep.

The reference to Goldmann's difficulties had troubled Little Paul, so on our return trip we made a short detour through Butare, the former Belgian capital. Before noon the next day we found the forestry engineer at his pension on the city's outskirts, unconscious, with a giant, blood-soaked bandage around his head. Near his bedstead lay an empty bottle of Johnnie Walker. The pungent smell in the dark room suggested that no one had been tending to the man; he must have been lying in his filth for days. The old Twa running the pension, whose deep-set eyes regarded us mistrustfully from under bushy brows, firmly refused even to touch the injured *Umuzungu*. Little Paul was not upset by this, noting that the Twa were outstanding potters and cunning hunters. Although this woman had probably never in her life taken up a bow or a potter's wheel, he meant that certain natural skills do not go with civilized work such as tending to the sick.

That's how Little Paul was. He loved this country unreservedly, and so here he generously excused things he might have disapproved of at home. Not a fiber of cynicism had infected him, as happens to many people after years of fruitless drudgery in international service. Apart from his chronic sniffing he enjoyed an eternal cheerfulness, the primary cause of which was the carrot sticks, cleaned and packed in plastic bags from the pharmacy, which Ines, his wife, prepared for him each morning. On the way to Butare he nibbled continually on these vegetables, praising his digestion, which thanks to the carrots was in excellent condition. This was quite unusual among the whites. The constant plantains, rice, and beer made the bowels lazy and caused chronic constipation, but no one dared eat salad or unpeeled fruit for fear that the constipation could turn into its opposite, which, considering the local toilets, was the worse of the two possibilities.

We peeled the dirty clothes off the injured specialist, cleaned him, and loosened the bandage. A gaping wound was visible over his right ear. Little Paul disinfected it with some remaining whiskey and applied fresh gauze, and after we had lifted Goldmann back up onto his bed, we went by foot to the local hospital, where we arranged a bed for him as well as transport on a stretcher. The doctor cleared out a room, sending home early a woman who had just given birth and moving a dying old man into a corner of the hall. We were satisfied: for the time being, the man was provided for.

Since it was already afternoon and we did not intend to return to Kigali until the next day, we took a room at Ibis, a hotel on the main street, which even under the Belgians had been considered the best place on the square. The hotel restaurant was mainly frequented by whites and senior officials. In the cloakroom I discovered an unusual parasol with a handle shaped like a duck's head. As I went to hang up my jacket, that carved drake grinned in my face. Look who's here, it seemed to taunt me, the musketeer who got fucked in the ass by the customs agents. So he's managed to make it all the way to Butare—let's see what his next trick will be! I froze, staring into the duck's dull green eyes, and Little Paul had to address me three times before I emerged from my stupor. Paul was saying he'd like to rest for a while before we went to the arboretum together to further investigate Goldmann's accident.

Other than two Americans who were sitting over beer and little kebabs, the restaurant was empty. The concierge had a taciturn air and claimed to have no idea whom the parasol belonged to. So I sat down alone at a table by the entrance, where I could keep the cloakroom and the parasol in sight. I had not planned how I would respond; I had no idea what I wanted from this woman, if in fact it was her parasol. All I felt was my blood pounding in my neck as I dreamed up a thousand possible retorts. There I sat, waiting for the moment of revenge. But barely an hour later, before anyone could appear, Little Paul returned—eyes squinting and hair ruffled, but rested and prepared to put the world back in order. We set off on foot towards the arboretum, which lay on a gently sloping hill somewhat outside the city.

The accident had taken place two days earlier at around noon, the director explained to us, while Goldmann was taking his daily nap in the shade of a

*Ficifolia*. He had come into the office streaming with blood and said he was leaving for the afternoon. Then he got into his car and drove to the local hospital, where they dressed his wound temporarily and then let him go. The director had personally checked on him in the pension and had offered to drive him to the hospital in Kigali. But Goldmann had refused: it was just a cut, hardly worth talking about, and he would be back at work the next day. The director had seen at once that the head wound was quite deep, but it was only a scratch compared with the blow that this branch had done to Goldmann's pride.

We could see what the director was talking about as he led us through Parcel 103. There stood the accursed *Ficifolia*; the branch still lay in the spot where it had fallen on Goldmann. A good ten meters long, it was as thick as an elephant's foot and rotten at its base, apparently attacked by a fungus. Goldmann had intended to reinforce the sick portion so as to save the rest of the tree, which was healthy. He must have set his ladder against the wrong side of the branch, namely the side that he wanted to saw off, but no forestry engineer would ever do such a foolish thing—not if he was sober and in possession of his senses. Goldmann's colleague hinted to us that he had showed up at the arboretum drunk every day, and Little Paul, dumbfounded, asked why no one had prevented him from doing such dangerous work. They had tried to, the director said sheepishly, but he wouldn't let anyone hold him back: first because the rescue of a tree would brook no delay, and second because Goldmann would entrust his favorite eucalyptus to no one else. With this the man gave us a look as if to suggest that Goldmann was the victim of an unhappy love affair, not a forestry accident. *Ficifolia* served no purpose other than decoration, and the sight of those lovely red blossoms, which were sprinkled like blood on the ground around the fallen limb, reminded me with horror that the same type of tree stood in the garden of Amsar House.

Only on the way back did I fully appreciate the beauty of this garden. The trees had been planted in rows with great care, like the columns of a giant cathedral, roofed with a light arch of greenery. Near the trees from the Upper Lake region there were local varieties, such as *Newtonia*, from the cloud forests of Nyungwe. Some of them were overgrown with vines of amaranth, a climbing plant that blooms only once in ten years and then puts forth feathery white blossoms, or *Urubogo*, as they say here. From afar the crowns of the trees looked as if they were infested with mold. It was a sign of misfortune, according to the natives, because the blooming amaranth is said to bring war, hunger, and drought.

The sign proved to be doubly true. The lesser of the two catastrophes was Goldmann's death. The forestry engineer had died shortly after 4 o'clock, an embarrassed doctor at the hospital told us, and I still remember how Little Paul was unable to speak for a long moment; he stared at the doctor and gasped for air like a fish on land. They had tried everything, the doctor explained, but the resources at this hospital were quite limited, as we could see for ourselves, and he was powerless against sepsis ... and so on, all the usual complaints. He was not too shy to ask us to recommend him for a suitable position in Kigali, but if this was impossible, he requested that we at least confirm in writing that his clinic was not responsible for Goldmann's death. Paul stood there as if he were paralyzed, not answering. He simply could not believe that this country had dared to kill one of our colleagues—not after everything that Goldmann and the entire administration had done for its people.

They had brought Goldmann's body into the cellar and had undressed it, but strangely they left his underpants on, as if they were embarrassed to expose the genitals of an *Umuzungu*. His jaw had been set with a strip of canvas, and the wound over his right ear seemed larger, a flap of skin dangling from his head like a loose patch.

We stood in this un-air-conditioned cellar, which was more like a hole in the ground, and agreed that we had to bring Goldmann's body to Kigali as quickly as possible and from there transport him to Switzerland. Since it would soon be dark, we put off the search for transportation until the morning. In Goldmann's office, in the administration building of the arboretum, we packed up his few belongings: photographs, a compass, terrain maps, his reference books. Instead of dinner, we drank two double whiskeys, and soon went to our room.

Goldmann's death was awful, but to be honest, for me the true catastrophe was that by the time we returned to the Ibis, the parasol had disappeared. I do not believe in magic and I never have, but that day I felt the influence of the superstition that reigned over this country. Suddenly it seemed possible that all these events were inextricably connected—the incident in Brussels, the duck's head, Goldmann's death—though I did not know how. I agonized over it, furious with myself for not having waited longer that afternoon and for not leaving a

note. I spent half the night with Goldmann's notebooks, and the remaining hours I tossed and turned, restless and troubled by dreams.

The next morning, of all times, it was raining cats and dogs, a sudden, fierce cloudburst in the middle of the dry season. Little Paul and I combed the town for a hearse and found nothing but a pickup plastered with chicken filth, which we could hardly expect a specialist from the administration to put up with, even when he was cold and stiff. Meanwhile, back at the sick ward, they had prepared Goldmann for the journey to Kigali by washing the body and placing it in a coffin made from *Eucalyptus tereticornis*. I had read about this rapidly growing eucalyptus in Goldmann's notebooks. German missionaries had brought this type of tree to Lake Kivu, and in 1912 they had chopped one of them down as the first eucalyptus of the country. Its wood was reddish, hard, and durable, and would rot extremely slowly, which made it a poor choice to hold a dead body.

The country was overpopulated, and in Butare province things were particularly hopeless. For every dead person there were three newborns, mouths that somehow had to be fed, and if the growth rate continued like this, in 15 years the country's population would double. The hunger for land was already impossible to satisfy; the hills had been cultivated up to their crests. Even the dead were scarcely allowed their graves; goats were permitted to graze in the cemeteries so that the land there would not go entirely unused. After ten years the graves were dug up, and often enough the *tereticornis* coffins emerged intact. Goldmann had explained to the relevant authorities that they should use a wood with weaker fibers, such as *Eucalyptus pellita* or *Eucalyptus rubida*. In his notes he complained bitterly about the bureaucrats who had heard him out, agreed, and then nonetheless done nothing. Little Paul and I also found the obstinacy of the authorities hard to bear: the wood was as heavy as lead. Worse, the coffin was too long for Paul's Toyota Tercel, which, owing to the lack of other possibilities, had to serve as our hearse. Paul was briefly angry that we could not close the tailgate and had to bring the man's mortal remains to Kigali in the manner of an old dishwasher. Well, this is Africa, he finally said, and fastened the trunk with a bungee cord.

The sky was finally clear, but the midday rain had turned the streets into a slippery mess. Paul carefully steered the car toward Kigali, its heavily weighted tail often skidding on the curves. What bothered me more were the people who

accompanied us on our journey. The news that two *Abazungu* were driving their dead colleague to Kigali had traveled faster than our car. From the first light of day until the last of the sun's rays had set, the streets of this country were always lined with a procession of people: people transporting their wares to market in wheelbarrows; women bringing filled baskets home from the fields; men bringing papers to the local government office. Shortly past Rubona, this procession transformed into a line of mourners, a convoy for the dead engineer. The people we passed stood still for a moment and turned toward us. Women set down their loads and took their children by the hand, and anyone who was wearing a hat raised it.