

Beira Through the Looking Glass

and What the Journalists Found There

SEAN CHRISTIE

(with apologies to Donald Barthelme
and Lewis Carroll)

The photographer sighed

The translator sighed

Both the writer and the
photographer sighed

The mayor sighed

Eusabio blew out his cheeks, and
gamely smiled

A catastrophe most often recalled
with a sigh

The sun's light was weak on the enormous wreck of The Grande Hotel on the southern end of the Beira promenade. In fact it was fading, so the translator Saratiel, who had been praying all night with fellow Zimbabwean apostolics on the beach across the road from the Miramar, was told to go in search of Joao Goncalves, the hotel's ad-hoc mayor.

The search for a contrast to the lovely news that the European Union would soon be funding the rehabilitation of Beira's drains had ended, inevitably, in front of the Grande Hotel, which glared dark-eyed at the contaminated Bay (the menace in that look mitigated by the ficus trees sprouting from the fourth storey balconies like cauliflower ears).

It looked exactly like a Guy Tillim photograph.

Joao Goncalves materialised from unknown labours with chalky white arms and politely touched the teams' extended hands with his clean elbows. He was a short man with an almost quadrilateral pot-belly, who after learning the reason for this visit quickly delegated the responsibility of guiding the team through The Grande to a moustachioed Mestizo named Eusabio. Eusabio had been among the first FRELIMO soldiers billeted on the third floor of The Grande in the late 1970s, years after the original Portuguese owners had abandoned the structure. After being variously used as a party conference venue and army barracks, the art deco hotel had been overrun by squatters, driven from the countryside by the civil war which was soon raging between FRELIMO and right-wing insurgents RENAMO.

The photographer suppressed a desire to sigh

The photographer sighed

The translator shrugged his shoulders

The writer suppressed a desire to sigh.

The crone may be imagined sighing inside her lean-to

Standing on the vehicle ramp before the entrance hall, which was currently occupied by a small tuck-shop and two wooden mortars used for dehulling rice, the team considered how best to approach the matter at hand.

‘Corporeality,’ suggested the writer. ‘Tillim is chaste: concrete and broody. Haunted, abandoned rooms are his thing. We’ll go the other way. We want snotty noses, crowded halls, turds.’

‘What is turds?’ queried the thoughtful apostolic translator. The writer explained and he said: ‘oh-oh, faeces – yes, we will find them.’

The tour began in the entrance hall, where children who had aggregated on the helix of the staircase shouted, ‘Fuck you, Fuck you! *Vovo vou te tudar!*’

Saratiel, channelling Eusabio, explained that the hall became a classroom during the week, as suggested by the winsome chalk drawings of freestanding houses that covered the dirty floor. To keep the children from falling down the elevator shaft into the basement, the two square holes had been cleverly plugged with 30 feet of litter, upon which an alopecic rat was grazing. The photographer approached it with her camera but the rat fled before she could film it.

Against the stairs a candle was glowing behind the gauze curtain of an internal lean-to.

‘We allow an old woman to live there in return for fetching water for the residents from the well outside,’ said Eusabio.

The translator shook his head

Eusabio shook his head

Saratiel and Eusabio shook their heads simultaneously

The writer made a scrawl in his notebook which was itself like a sigh for the lost dignity of the colonial era

The smacked girl gasped and rolled her eyes

Eusabio emitted an exaggerated sigh

Writer and photographer gagged

Eusabio explained, too, that the population of the Grande is so large – 3,650 now – that the building has been declared an independent district of Beira and assigned a municipal councillor. Important matters such as the curiosity of journalists, filmmakers and artists, are adjudicated by a committee led by Goncalves, who was the natural choice, Eusabio explained, by virtue of the fact that he supports RENAMO and works for the municipality. However, after the newly constituted Mozambique Democratic Movement took the municipality in November, there is a chance that Goncalves will have to relinquish his command.

‘Probably we will have to find some mother fucker from the MDM to lead us,’ Eusabio muttered quietly.

The state of infrastructure in Beira and the logic of her politics are intimately related, explained Saratiel. FRELIMO liberated the country but let Beira’s infrastructure fall apart because the Sofala Province in which Beira is located was once a stronghold of RENAMO, the right-wing force backed by neighbouring white dictatorships.

‘In revenge everything important in the economy of Mozambique now gets moved to Maputo and Beira gets nothing,’ said Saratiel. ‘That’s why people have been voting RENAMO before and now MDM.’

The profiled heads of all three parties – peeling in places – followed Eusabio down a ramp into the dark basement as he explained that this area of The Grande was initially used as a dungeon for FRELIMO’s political opponents. The sound of piano keys could be heard tinkling out of the cavernous basement *boîte*, but this apparent reference to dance soirees of the colonial heyday turned out to be nothing more than the intro to Chris Brown’s *Superhuman*, which one hears played on battery powered radios everywhere in Beira at the moment.

Ignoring a couple who were irate at the intrusion of strangers into this space, Eusabio took to the circular dance floor with crooked arms and danced a solo *pasada* for our benefit, then smacked the daughter of the angry-eyed father on the arse and

worked her limp arms like levers while he swayed his hips.

‘People here are crazy,’ he said. ‘They are not normal people.’

‘Faeces,’ Saratiel yelled unexpectedly as the tour nears the kitchen, which must have had a glass roof once but was now something more of an atrium into which refuse had been thrown for 30 years, so that it rose around the walls to a height of 20 feet.

Writer and photographer breathed in deeply

‘These people hang their bottoms over the balconies and the faeces land here,’ explained Saratiel, who was at pains to point out that this was strictly a night-time practice, and one which was somewhat contrary to the unwritten codes of The Grande. For diurnal ablutions the councillor had secured a stretch of beach across the road, to the right of a storm flow outlet. Urinating and washing took place in reed enclosures dotted around the hotel, as the hotels’ toilets had long since been ripped out and sold, and the bathrooms themselves had been divided by cane walls to make little flatlets.

Writer and photographer nodded solemnly

‘In Mozambique we used to talk about concrete towns and cane towns,’ said Saratiel. ‘Concrete towns were for the Europeans, and cane towns were for the locals. Now after independence the two have come together – a cane town inside a concrete building.’

Writer and photographer exhaled in a way that indicted China generally

Inspired by this witty conflation the writer called for more rats: ‘Tell Eusabio to show us where they feed.’ The former soldier whistled and warned that the rodents of the Grande, like the fist-sized spiders and the human inhabitants, were not normal. ‘The cats won’t touch them. In the morning I will show you a cat and a rat eating side by side, no problem. But there are not so many now since the Chinese road makers started paying the children to catch them alive – 5 *meticais* for a rat.’

The translator shook his head

The translator groaned from the back of his throat

A young couple sitting a little distance from the main building motioned the photographer over. ‘Take a picture,’ the teenage boy said, and as the photographer was adjusting focus he pinched his girl’s nipple.

The translator sighed

Horrified sighs

The photographer failed to suppress a weary sigh

The writer failed to suppress an irritated sigh

Upon hearing this photographer and writer knew that they were perpetrating another mild plagiarism, and sighed

‘Take a picture, take a picture.’

‘These people will sleep with anyone,’ said Saratiel. ‘Marriage means nothing to them. Even married women will sleep with other men. When Samora Machel was still alive and leading Mozambique he told these people there was no God. So here they are, still living with no God. Watch out, here are some more faeces.’

The worst portions of The Grande, by common consent, were the flats on the bottom floor, the balconies of which were constantly being bombarded by litter, bathwater and nocturnal turds. But of course each floor in the wasted hulk had its challenges, chief of which for small children and heavy drinkers were the gaping elevator shafts and the absence of rails along the aerial walkways, which were once covered by plate glass. Eusabio reported that two children had taken falls recently and survived. A man had fallen into a shaft one night after drinking too much *nipa* and had died on the refuse heap below.

The fading light now drove Eusabio upwards to the crumbling roof, level with the ficus trees sprouting from the uppermost balconies. ‘The birds bring them here in their faeces,’ commented Saratiel, conjuring an improbable but lasting image.

‘Try getting some of the children near the edge of the building,’ the writer recommended to the photographer, adding, as he advanced towards the children with his notebook out in front like a bible, ‘I shouldn’t worry about it, they seem to be gravitating towards the lip anyway.’

Shortly afterwards, the tour was interrupted by a young woman who had spotted a lens trained from the roof in her direction, and had concluded that a movie was being made about her life without her consent. Eusabio poo-pooed her mounting wrath, while Saratiel bravely attempted to make certain distinctions between the invasiveness of still and filmic media.

‘The woman is angry,’ said Saratiel, ‘because last year a Belgian filmmaker made a documentary here without her consent.’

It was quite obvious by now that the committee made a small business out of allowing journalists to pry into the ecology of The Grande.

There was little to say after this. The tour was at an end, though it seemed that everyone was reluctant to descend through the dark, infested building again to the entrance. There was very little will to do anything.

Eusabio had Saratiel communicate the standard rate.