The View from Africa: Granta 92 (Granta)

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The View from Africa is a rag-bag, or, in a more complimentary term, a miscellany, comprising short stories, extracts from novels, memoirs, documentary essays, opinion pieces, photo essays. In his Introduction, "The Many Voices of Africa", John Ryle by implication suggests why such a miscellaneous assortment should be necessary to reflect what the volume title promises as a single perspective: "The mistake is to generalize . . . Because the continent has a clear geographical unity it is tempting to hold forth about it." It is, then, presumably in an attempt to avoid this mistake that the compilers have brought about such a wide-ranging collection of contributions, each rooted in a very particular spot of the continent, few of them seeking to "hold forth" about Africa.

The exception is a mock-serious but in fact very funny piece by the Kenyan Biniyavanga Wainaina called "How to write about Africa": "Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize," advises Wainaina, and lists "taboo subjects" for the writer: "ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation."

In other words, Wainaina is saying, the world wants to read of Africa as the miserable continent, not about ordinary Africans going about their business. By and large, this collection defies this "taboo" and gives us those "ordinary domestic scenes" that according to Wainaina make such bad copy.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's charming story "The Master" (in fact an extract from a forthcoming novel) is about as domestic as one can be without disappearing down the kitchen sink: the protagonist is the newly appointed houseboy in the home of a university lecturer (the revered "Master" of the title). So here we also have that other taboo, the African intellectual, and, like Ugwu, the houseboy, the Master is treated with amused tolerance; the potentially problematic power relation between them is somehow subsumed in the sheer good intentions of Ugwu and "Master" alike.

We may ask why it should be worthy of comment that hey, Africans are normal. The answer is, of course, that that normality is achieved in the face of such terrible odds. Something of the struggle to be ordinary is depicted in Moses Isegawa's "The War of the Ears", in which a young man, hardly more than a boy, proudly helps his mother to run the school she has built up from nothing. But their school, indeed their existence, is threatened by God's Victorious Brigades, a child army, which has identified the school as "standing in the way of God' work". The Army's preferred method of dealing with the "disobedient" is to cut off their ears. Part of the horror of the story lies in our being given access also to the thoughts of the child soldiers: also really only ordinary children subjected to extraordinary circumstances.

The Africa that the world wants to know about, the Africa of CNN news and *Hotel Rwanda*, is represented here in a non-fiction piece by Daniel Bergner, "Policeman to the World", a by and large admiring portrait of one Mark Kroeker, the UN's police commissioner in Liberia. An evangelical Christian, son of a missionary, Kroeker brings

to his job the zeal of his convictions. His job, as he sees it, is “establishing a foundation of morality” in the corrupt, disorganised Liberian National Police; he seems puzzled when “asked if he ever worried about reinforcing an old message of moral superiority and racial hierarchy.” Such questions, he seems to feel are beside the point, in the face of “the three million dead in the Congo”. If there is any trace here of Graham Greene’s Quiet American, Bergner does not labour the point.

The most thoughtful reflection on the tension between the domestic and the political, the ordinary and the grotesque, comes from the South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, in his photo essay “The Black Albums”. He tells how in 1985 he was hired “to document Soweto and the rising discontent in the townships.” But this was not really where his professional interest lay: “I was less interested in the unrest than in the ordinary life in the townships … I was unhappy with the propaganda images that reduced life in the townships into one of perpetual struggle, because I felt this representation to be incomplete.”

But in assembling the photographs that make up the bulk of his contribution, Mofokeng comes, as he says, “to explore the politics of representation.” For these photographs, from the turn of the twentieth century, “solemn images of middle- and working-class families black families”, are almost parodically domestic. What makes them political is that, according to Mofokeng, they “portray a class of people who, according to my history lessons, did not exist at the time they were made.”

With characteristic humour Ivan Vladislavic, in “Joburg” also traces the intrusion of the political upon the domestic, in this instance in the moral quandary of having to hire a security guard to safeguard the guests’ cars while throwing a party. The cars are safe, but what about the guard? “That’s it, we say to one another afterwards. No more parties. Never again.”

The echo of Mandela’s famous “Never, never and never again …” forms a wry comment on that idealistic vision; but if “No more parties” is a grim moral to draw from this collection, it also, in its tough humour, represents something of that resilience that has enabled the raddled old continent, somehow, to survive. As John Ryle says, indulging in that generalisation that he calls a mistake in others, “The capacity for hope in the face of catastrophe is a characteristically African gift.” As gifts go, it’s not much; but as this collection shows, it’s not negligible either.