



Reluctant witness to the death of a dream

IT would require some luck to peg the trim, thoughtfully bearded 50-year-old man sitting in the fading afternoon light as a foreign correspondent. Indeed, dressed in a sweater and jeans, wearing pink argyle socks that flash as he crosses a leg, Peter Godwin seems about as far from a war zone as one can get, in a room of floor-to-ceiling bookcases and an elegant symmetry of lamps and decor. In its lush, ordered calm, this salon is a world apart. Even Manhattan's nearby West Side Highway has been reduced to a whisper.

And then Godwin begins to speak about Zimbabwe. "It's very painful," he starts out, trying to describe how it felt to watch his native country dissolve from Africa's success story into abject poverty and corruption. Godwin was born there in 1957, when it was the colonial state of Southern Rhodesia, a period he described in his vivid memoir *Mukiwa*. He left for university in England, then watched as the wild dreams of the newly independent country were squandered before making way for arrangements that enriched its leaders. His sister and her fiancé were murdered during Zimbabwe's birth pangs.

In the years since, Zimbabwe has spiralled steadily downwards, with the increasingly dictatorial President Robert Mugabe enacting land reform in a manner that pitted angry war veterans against landed white farmers. "I worry when you get to see the country through the lens of this contrived crisis," Godwin says, recalling that Mugabe toured the same farms in the 1980s and told the white owners: "We need you."

"These farms were looted and then given away, and now they are doing the same to industry. It all helps to create a smokescreen behind which Mugabe can operate," he says.

Peter Godwin offers a devastating portrait of Zimbabwe's decline in his new memoir, writes **John Freeman**

Zimbabwe was heading towards this crisis more than a decade ago when Godwin learned his father had suffered a heart attack. This rupture lies at the heart of his latest memoir, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, another engrossing journey back to Zimbabwe, this time examined through the twin lenses of his father's declining health and the country's staggering, stage-managed decline, which Godwin reports on with the style and urgency of a combat zone veteran. "It's more or less irreparable," Godwin says of the way Zimbabwe's state has affected him emotionally. "It's your cultural history ... the loss does make you kind of wobble."

But he kept taking notes the whole time. Travelling across Zimbabwe to the farms of friends and acquaintances as they are occupied by angry, often drunk and menacing war veterans, he keeps a keen eye trained on the restraint at the heart of the whole ugly situation. "The bizarre thing is that the Government gave them free rein," Godwin says of the war veterans, who were promised reparations. "They said, 'Do whatever you want. Just go for it. There will be no consequences.' And in the whole thing, 15 whites got killed. That's never looked at ... There was a huge hesitation to commit violence."



To the outside world this may have been a surprise, but to Godwin it was not. He began travelling across Africa as a graduate student in 1980-81, making his way from North Africa to Harare overland, filing dispatches to Britain's *The Times* without any sense of whether they would be published. On arriving bedraggled in Harare, he had a stack of clippings and a considerably enriched sense of the complicated racial components of life in Africa, and especially Zimbabwe. He went on to apply this empathic understanding to conflict zones across the world as a reporter and BBC producer.

That Godwin is a white Zimbabwean is simultaneously utterly irrelevant and entirely the crux of *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*. He was, as he remembered in *Mukiwa*, schooled in an era when white children were taught to practise putting down a black rebellion. He could leave, and did, travelling to England for university, and then to the US, where he has lived on and off for a decade. But he also comes from a family with deep roots among the black community: his mother was a physician whose patients were often black Zimbabweans suffering from the ravages of AIDS.

Flying in and out of this situation in the late '90s, his father's health failing, the country deteriorating, Godwin tried not to belabour his guilt but was struck by it time and again. "I am fascinated by that juxtaposition," he says, looking around himself at the walls of hardback books, the accoutrements of the life he leads with his wife, Joanna Coles, editor of the US edition of *Marie Claire*. There were times toggling back and forward between the two very different societies, he says, when his life in Manhattan seemed a little surreal.

One of the most striking things revealed in *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is the degree to which Godwin is not alone with this feeling that it was, in fact, his heritage. In the course of revisiting home, Godwin discovers that his father had made up an entirely new identity; that George Godwin, this Anglo-African in a safari suit and desert boots, was born Kazio Goldfarb, a Polish Jew from Warsaw. As George reveals in a memoir he writes and mails to his son, his mother and sister vanished during the Holocaust. He changed his name and relocated to Zimbabwe after marrying a woman in the British navy. "My father was gone by 14," Godwin says now. "His story is one of dislocation, of being wrenched from his background."

There was something ironic about this discovery, that in moving to the most Jewish neighbourhood of the most Jewish city in the US, Godwin discovered that he was in fact at home. But he didn't want to think too hard about his identity.

"As if I didn't have enough things to think about," he laughs.

While researching his father's true background, he found terrifying similarities between the growth of anti-Semitism in Poland and the way Mugabe used anti-white sentiment to bolster his popularity in Zimbabwe.

Godwin is careful not to say that *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is a book about his own victimhood as a white African. Nor does he believe it's a report on black Zimbabwe. It is, rather, the story of his family and his country, as he sees it, from his experience. "In an autobiography, you care implicitly about what happens," he says, making a rather neat definition. "In a memoir, to use a film term, the camera is on your shoulder, as a writer, and it turns when you turn."

Mukiwa and *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, then, are not just literary endeavours for Godwin, or even inspired acts of Proustian retrieval. It is almost as if he sees them as after-images from a portrait of Zimbabwe as it is, showing the country it could have been.

"I want them to understand they have this plurality of heritage," he says of his countrymen, "if only to keep this corridor open, because I think in the end it's often cultural heterogeneity which gets exploited: you see it happening in Kenya right now."

Godwin is following the US primaries closely. He is excited about Barack Obama, the Kenyan-American who represents plurality and hope for a lot of voters.

"The quickest way to rehabilitate this country's image in the world would be to vote for Obama,"



Godwin says, without finding it necessary to elaborate the reasons. He may be right. One thing is certain: he knows what it's like when things fall apart.

John Freeman is president of the National Critics Circle.

Peter Godwin will be a guest at the Perth Writers Festival. Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa and When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir are published by Picador.



A world apart: Compared with life in Zimbabwe, his Manhattan existence occasionally seems surreal to Peter Godwin