Blues for Zimbabwe
A Personal Essay

By MONIQUE CLESCA

SPECIAL SECTION on Africa

On that cool early morning years ago when I entered the immense concrete hall of the Harare airport, Zimbabwe was full of promise: I had just crossed the Caribbean sea, the Atlantic Ocean and three continents to start a new job there.

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It was January 27th, 2004 and although I had heard media reports that its President, Robert Mugabe, had killed and starved thousands and displaced many more, I still gave him the benefit of the doubt—if only because of Bob Marley.

Mugabe had been my hero… not only for liberating his people from the deadly apartheid regime of Ian Smith's Rhodesia that followed long-term English colonialism, but for the genius of having invited the singer Bob Marley to perform at the independence ceremony for the birth of Zimbabwe. On April 18th, 1980, as Mugabe ceremoniously pronounced the freedom of Rhodesia—a huge southern African country landlocked between Zambia, Botswana, South Africa and Mozambique—Bob Marley sang "Zimbabwe," the reggae song he had composed to honor the new country. Four thousand miles away in New York City, I and millions of others throughout the world, reggae-d happily as the Rasta-man preached, "*Every man got a right to decide his own destiny…*"

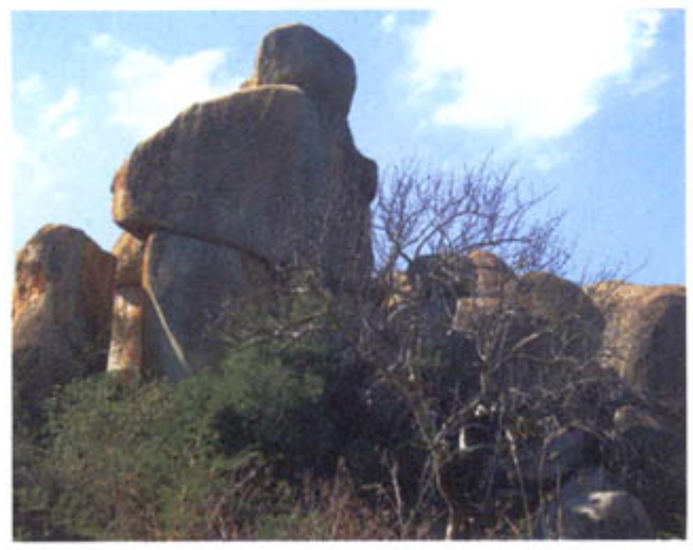
I believed Bob Marley and I trusted Robert Mugabe. I raised my arms and sang along:

> *"Brother, you're right, you're right, You're right, you're right, you're so right!"*

I was happy to go live in Zimbabwe; my 17-year old son joined me a few months later for a year's sabbatical prior to starting his university studies. I settled into life there twenty-four years after that ceremony, and occasions to see the country's reality abounded. I learned about Great Zimbabwe, the empire that dominated the area in the 14th century, and whose majestic ruins amaze to this day. Zimbabwe's belly holds a wealth of diamonds, gold, silver, copper, coal, granite, zinc and the second largest reserves of platinum in the world, much to the pleasure of China who is a major trading partner today and referred to by my friends as "the new colonialist." Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls are the largest waterfalls in the universe and its balancing rock formations are wondrous. Its capital city has the most jacaranda trees of any place and they color Harare's streets violet blue with sparkles of flowers when in bloom during the southern hemisphere's spring.

But beyond its grandiose symbols and its stupendous physical attributes, Zimbabwe under Mugabe during my five-year stay was like having open-heart surgery without anesthesia in the middle lane of a rainy highway. It was hungry, broke, deprived, angry and disillusioned.

Murato, my driver, told me stories of how he and so many others had supplied intelligence to Mugabe's freedom fighters during the armed liberation struggle that started in the 60s. A short man with a malicious stare, he had a dark, sharply chiseled face that rarely flinched and a deep voice that echoed exactly what he meant. He taught my son how to drive, took meticulous care of the car and ran my errands while I worked in international development at the UN. Murato was a profound realist who had long ago given up his dreams to feed his family and keep his two children in school in a country spiraling downhill in an acute financial, human and political man-made emergency.



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Sunset on a Zambezi River Cruise, 2007.

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Great Zimbabwe main wall dating from the 14th century Unesco World Heritage protected site.

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Harare's Jacaranda trees in bloom, October 2nd, 2006.

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Matopo Hills granite rock formations. Matabeland. Unesco World Heritage protected site, 2007.

One day while he drove me downtown, I noticed long orderly queues of men and women standing, some with more than 50 persons. They were in front of large concrete office buildings, and not at bus stops or train stations.

"What is going on?" I asked.

"Madam, if someone yelled in front of the Federal Reserve Bank decorated with the mighty Great Zimbabwe eagle that meat was being sold in one of the bank windows, people would queue to get it," he said.

I noticed sadness in his eyes, despite his faint smile, and wondered why.

"They are hungry. They want meat. They are desperate. Madam, we have become a people of queues. Zimbabweans queue up for sugar, flour, even for meat at the Federal Reserve Bank," he said bursting out in uncontrollable laughter. He was as serious as a heart attack. I couldn't laugh, knowing that he was probably laughing to hide his humiliation. How did it get this bad?

In a misguided show of solidarity in the 90s, Mugabe sent his army to fight in the Democratic Republic of Congo fratricidal war, wasting millions of dollars. Worse, when the war veterans returned to meager benefits, they threatened to bring the war home unless their demands for land and money were met. Mugabe's solution was to expropriate the huge commercial farms owned by White Zimbabweans in favor of his war veterans (Many, especially White Zimbabweans and Whites in Europe and the United States thought Mugabe's approach was racist, so did many Blacks). Mugabe's "solution" destroyed the country's financial base, left thousands of Blacks jobless, killed hundreds of White Zimbabweans (today they are considered an endangered species) and ruined the food chain of what was considered Africa's breadbasket.

Land redistribution is what Mugabe calls his policy, farm invasions is what it's called by the White farmers who successfully contested it as a human rights violations up to the regional SADC tribunal system—either way, it guaranteed his stay in power and bought unnecessary suffering to many. Added to this are the sanctions imposed upon Zimbabwe by the United States and European countries like Great Britain and France, because of Mugabe's "Land Distribution" policy. Wherever I travelled by road outside of Harare, I witnessed abandoned, overgrown weeds and unused, dilapidated watering systems where farms had flourished—they were now the "properties" of "Friends Of Bob" (FOB), which included members of Mugabe's ruling party ZANU PF and his security forces in addition to some well-connected war veterans.

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As I strived to understand Zimbabwe, the name of Ian Smith kept coming up. I realized that that Mugabe's land policy did not really address the core social issue: the festering feelings of Blacks against Whites and Whites against Blacks. I remember reading that Smith, much like my dentist, my landlady and the couple of farmers on whose homestead I spent a weekend with my visiting mother, are part of the "tribe" of people who call themselves White Africans: they were born in Africa, with some claiming close to 300 years of "African" heritage from when their forefathers immigrated from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. Smith, a savvy politician who rose to become Prime Minister of the territory under British colonialism, declared independence from Britain in 1965 in the middle of negotiations for Black majority rule and called the land Rhodesia. His position was: Africa, without white rule would not work. And so he proceeded to install a state-machinery that institutionalized racism, carried out severe repression and imprisoned many Black nationalists, including Robert Mugabe, who was in a Smith prison without trial for 11 years for organizing to fight against white rule, during which time he studied for two university degrees and lost his only son without being allowed to bury him.

Smith's defiant resistance to Black rule provoked a guerilla war partly led by Mugabe, which cost thousands of lives and caused massive destruction to the country. His white supremacist views left a legacy of hatred, anger and mistrust between Whites and Blacks, which lives on until today. This undoubtedly fueled silo relationships between White famers and their Black workers where little or no skills transfer or empowerment happened.

Things were bad in the 1980s, even between African tribes, according to my girlfriend Patience who tells me bluntly: "Mugabe killed my people." Her people are the Ndebele, descendants of the mighty Zulu tribe that settled in the Matabeleland area in the 1830s and today rule tribal lands in independent South Africa. Matabeland, whose capital is Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe, is where Matopo Hills, a UNESCO World Heritage site, are thrones on exceptionally-huge granite boulders which the early Bushmen who lived in and around its caves used as canvas' to create their exquisite rock art.

Patience, who is a tall, caramel-skinned woman with a determined walk, high cheekbones and clear almond eyes, came to visit one evening to tell me about Mugabe's ethnic violence. Following a revolt of several hundred members of his rival Joshua Nkomo's militia in the early 1980s, Mugabe ordered his mostly Shona tribe dominated Fifth Brigade—a special unit trained by North Korea's army—into Ndebele land to quell the uprising. Her voice trembled as she said that even twenty—five years later, survivors tell of a concentration camp in an area called Antelope, of people being beaten, shot, burned to death and thrown into mine shafts.

In confession-style story telling language, Patience tells me to consider the wisdom of her name: "We, Ndebele, wait patiently. We know that someday after Mugabe's death, the world will know how he killed our people. My sister, in Matabeleland, we don't speak of massacres, but of genocide." I felt an immense sadness but was too speechless to offer solace. But as Patience left me that cold wintry evening, I was overcome by the timbre of her voice that conveyed her strong sense of freedom—***she*** had chosen ***her*** destiny. I buried myself in books and everything I read confirmed Patience's story, much to my chagrin.

←← Rock art created by Bushmen in Matopo Hills Matabeleland Unesco Heritage protected site, 2005.

↑ Harare's colonial-designed train station, June 1st, 2007.

↗ Ndebele dancers greeting passengers at the Victoria Falls airport 2007

Nonetheless, I was grateful to Mugabe for one thing: one wintry July day, I became a millionaire, when a 100-billion dollar bill was issued by the Government, which kept on printing money it didn't have. It took me weeks to come to terms with my new wealth since for the first time, I couldn't count my money—it was simply too much. I had to use a small roller suitcase to carry it all. At the supermarket, the cashiers with their money-counting machines looked like the backroom moneymen seen on hip-hop music videos and prices were no longer displayed because they changed so rapidly. At 9 AM, ten US dollars could equal 30 billion Zim dollars, 80 billion at noon and 150 billion at 4 PM. While I was happy to be a "multimillionaire," the money I had was worthless—inflation had deep resonance for me and everyone else. Zimbabwe was broke.

My hunt for a chicken for a small dinner illustrated the illogicality of life then—meat was unavailable since cattle owners had gone on an undeclared but successful strike to protest the price controls imposed by the Government. Murato took me to the biggest supermarket in town because it was well stocked since it was owned by a Mugabe ally. I found lots of chickens there, but the smallest one cost 60 American dollars. I ran away. Another neighborhood butcher shop also had chickens, but at 30 dollars each. I walked out.

Murato offered to go to the local market. While I was ecstatic that he purchased seven-dollars worth of chickens, I was surprised to find only four tiny wings. Miraculously, the next morning a colleague invited me to her office, which had become, for the occasion, a supermarket. The chicken owner was clear: each bird cost 7 dollars to be paid in US currency. I became a chicken drug addict since I bought eight—one for the dinner and the rest were given to Murato, Julia and the office staff. Several times in the past, I had shared with Murato and Julia oil, sugar or flour brought in from my travels in South Africa.

But as months, and years passed, people's frustrations were growing and powerlessness was settling in.

"Beauty, how is it?" my 17-year old son asked the skinny young man with dreadlocks standing idly by the road while he leaned outside the window to shake his hand in a seemingly endless pulling and pushing movement that signified deep brotherhood. Murato had stopped the car at a traffic sign.

Beauty who wore his name well responded: "It's tough, brother. This is a country with no men."

"No men?" my son echoed.

"Yes," Beauty said. "If there were men, long ago they would have stood up and said this is enough. But the women work, struggle to feed the children and suffer. The men… I don't know what they do. But I do know that they should fight for us."

"Got to go, Beauty. Stand firm," my son said, as Murato sped away.

"The boy is right, Madam, we are no longer men. We are pawns in Bob's game," Murato whispered angrily, using one of Mugabe's code name out of fear. I responded with a soft caress of my son's arm to teach him compassion, showing that I understood Murato and his friend's pain.

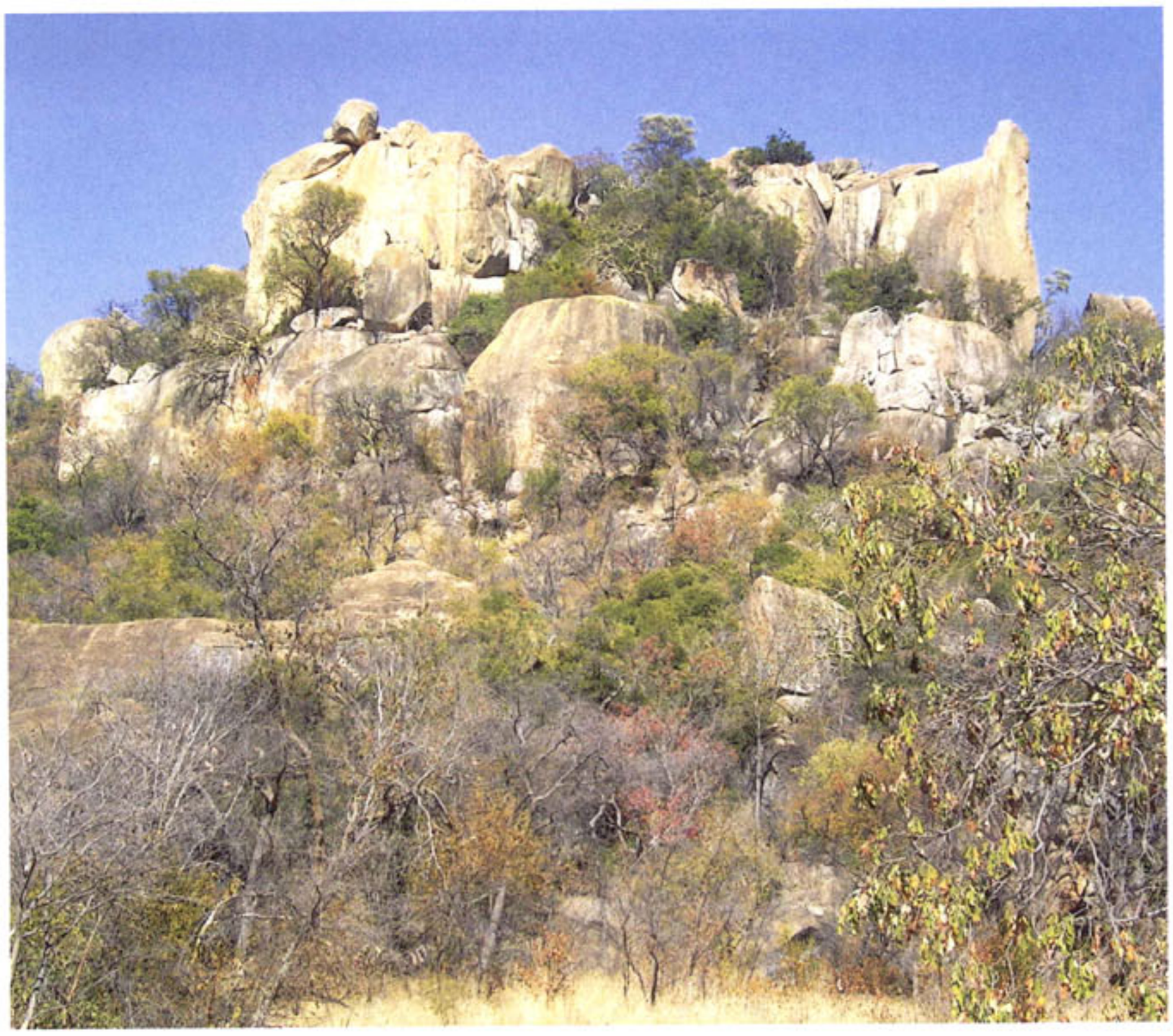
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONIQUE CLESCA

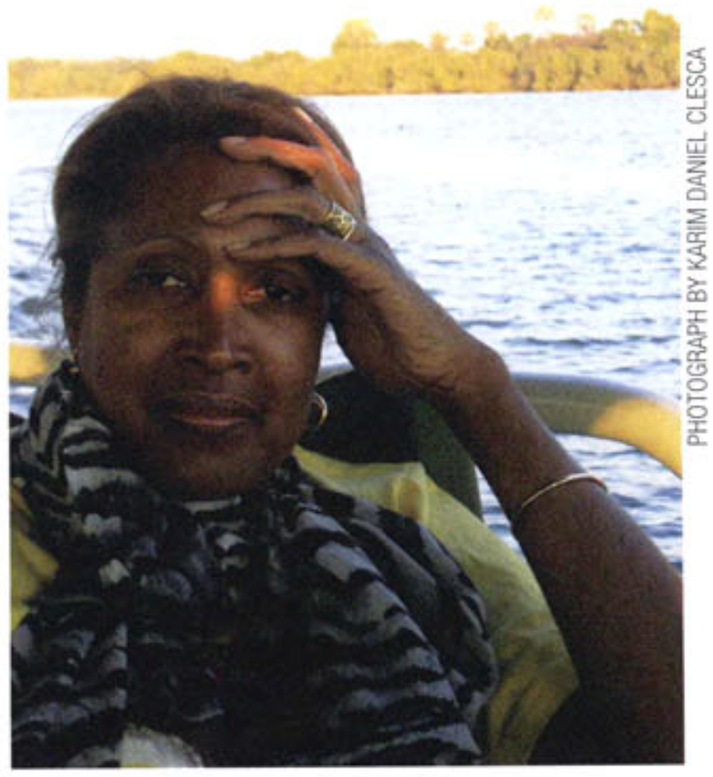
Most of all, it was the violence, or threat of it, that made life even more unbearable. Julia, my housemaid, had learned through her career as a domestic worker to be silent and invisible. This short trim woman, shy by nature, had six children before losing her oldest daughter to AIDS. She is what specialists call an AIDS grandmother: she has become the mother of her daughter's children. Her slow walk is less a measure of her agility as it is a gauge of the strength that she must conserve to live her life in today's Zimbabwe.

One Monday morning, she finally confided about the horror of it all. The previous Sunday, she had visited her brother who had been badly beaten a few days earlier and was told he would die if he didn't vote for Mugabe in the upcoming elections. Many others in her village had also been brutalized in a massive intimidation campaign that included abductions and rapes. She was scared of losing her brother, as she was of losing her finger—she and hundreds of people were threatened with amputation of their index finger if it was not red, signifying that it had been dipped in the polling stations' indelible ink. Julia and most of her compatriots, did vote a few days later but her vote didn't matter—Mugabe was sworn in as President for his 28th year in office, despite unofficial election results that showed that he had lost. Why did it get so bad, particularly after reversing apartheid? Hadn't Mugabe instituted universal education and health care for all Zimbabweans? Greed is the only explanation as his hunger for power overcame all the good deeds despite the cost.

Mugabe did face some opposition, symbolized mostly by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai, who was said to have lost consciousness three times during a 2007 beating session by the police at a Harare jail. His lawyer informed that his client was unable to eat or speak for several days and was lucky to be alive. I heard many things about this former mine worker and union leader, such as that Zimbabweans who were graduates of the country's highly praised educational system, would never vote for a President who didn't have a Masters degree: many thought Tsvangirai was a spy for Her Majesty's Secret service or for the Americans: that he lacked a strategic mind: that he couldn't assemble even one thousand supporters and that he was a weak caricature of a leader. But others said Tsvangirai, for numerous years, had been the only credible opposition to Mugabe and deserved some praise, if only for his capacity of endurance of the brute violence handed out by Mugabe's own secret service!

I spent a long five years in Zimbabwe, with some spectacular adventures. Even before leaving for my new job in New York, I started to miss the place. I loved its perfect crisp high-altitude weather, its blue-sparkled Harare streets when strewn with jacaranda flowers, its clean, huge side-walked streets and its quiet demeanor. I loved its dangerously fiery lightning, its always perfect gardens, its wide open Msasa woodlands, its breathtaking safaris crowded with elephants and its hardworking courageous people. I loved its sunset, almost as much as my Caribbean one, as it casts its flickers of orange light on the mighty crocodile-infested Zambezi River while I sipped sundowners on the decks of riverboats on sunset cruises. I loved being greeted by the Ndebele dancers at the Victoria Falls airport, being rained on by the stupendous Falls and being coaxed to eat, much to my delight, alligator, ostrich, warthog and other game meat in a thatch-roofed lodge restaurant. Most of all, I loved my glass-ceilinged cottage, my private waterfall, my aquatic garden and my bamboo-fenced terrace in Harare where I could curl up to read, write and dream.





PHOTOGRAPH BY KARIM DANIEL CLESCA

↖↖ Crocodile swimming side by side with the sunset cruise boat.

← Matapo Hills granite rock formations Matabeleland Unesco World Heritage protected site, 2005.

←← Close encounter with an elephant during a cruise safari on the Sanyati Gorge, 2006.

↑ Monique Clesca cruising the Zambezi River.

Survival in Zimbabwe had taken away some of my spirit. In the darkness of the night with no electricity, an empty refrigerator, having to get water from the pool to flush the toilet and wash the dishes—I felt a profound sense of injustice as I observed the betrayal of the freedom of its people by Mugabe, his cronies and henchmen. The freedom so valiantly fought for was now hostage of one man's despotic folly. Still, I knew how privileged I was—I could leave… and did.

I have particularly missed Julia, Beauty, Patience and Murato's stoic courage—I often wonder how their general discontent and those of their people never degenerated into a social explosion. While it is clearly everyone's individual responsibility to rise up and cry freedom, the choice they made is one of quiet revolt and the opposition challenged the regime through the justice system. While I respect their choice, I deeply regret that this dictator is still free—despite his crimes against humanity.

In New York last September 2010, I saw the 87-year old Robert Mugabe. He was a short, sickly looking old man, with an anxious diluted glare above his Hitlerish moustache, limping towards me in the long carpeted hallway of the UN. Alone in his pressed blue pinstripe suit in the middle of five bodyguards, including a tall old man whose military uniform had an overdose of medals. Courtney, a young staffer whose job it was to take notes of this August assembly, told me she had souvenir photographs of herself with every head of state that had delivered an address. As Mugabe finished his speech, on her way to her photo op, Courtney offered to take my picture with him. I paused, saddened that my former hero had taken such a low road. I remembered that Bob Marley had sung solidarity with Zimbabwe:

Mash it up in-a (Zimbabwe);
Natty trash it in-a (Zimbabwe);
Africans a-liberate Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe);
I'n'I a-liberate Zimbabwe.

I was seething that Marley had to be turning over in his grave because Robert Mugabe had done the opposite of what he had promised. He removed every man's right to decide his own destiny in Zimbabwe by bringing dusk in before its time, so I turned to Courtney and told her with sadness: "No thanks, he has blood on his hands." ■

THE END

NOTE:

Since late 2008, an unequal power-sharing coalition brokered by SADC and led by South Africa with Mugabe as President and Tsvangirai as Prime Minister has been governing Zimbabwe. Arrests, beatings and other torturous acts of intimidation of Tsvangirai's government ministers and other citizens continue to be directed by Mugabe's generals and security forces. Elections are planned in 2012 and ZANU-PF has signaled that Mugabe will be its candidate for President.