

# NADINE GORDIMER

## INKALAMU'S PLACE

INKALAMU WILLIAMSON'S HOUSE is sinking and I don't suppose it will last out the next few rainy seasons. The red lilies still bloom as if there were somebody there. The house was one of the wonders of our childhood and when I went back to the territory last month for the independence celebrations I thought that on my way to the bauxite mines I'd turn off the main road to look for it. Like our farm, it was miles from anywhere when I was a child, but now it's only an hour or two away from the new capital. I was a member of a United Nations demographic commission (chosen to accompany them, I suppose, because of my old connection with the territory) and I left the big hotel after breakfast. The Peking delegation, who never spoke to any of us and never went about singly, came down with me in the lift. You could stare at them minutely, each in turn, neither they nor you were embarrassed. I walked through the cocktail terrace where the tiny flags of the nations stood on the tables from last night's reception, and drove myself out along the all-weather road where you can safely do eighty and drive straight on, no doubt, until you come out at the top of the continent—I only think of these things this way now; when I grew up here, this road didn't go anywhere else but home.

I had expected that a lot of the forest would have been cut down, but once outside the municipal boundary of the capital, it was just the same as always. There were no animals and few people. How secretly Africa is populated; when I got out of the car to drink coffee from my flask, I wanted to shout: Anybody there? The earth was neatly spaded back from the margins of the tar. I walked a few steps into the sunny forest, and my shoes exploded twigs and dry leaves like a plunderer. You must not start watching the big, egg-timer bodied ants: whole afternoons used to go, like that.

The new tarred road cuts off some of the bends of the old one, and when I got near the river I began to think I'd overshot the turn-off to Inkalamu's place. But no. There it was, the long avenue of jacarandas plunging into the hilly valley, made unfamiliar because of a clearing beside the main road and a cottage and little store that never used to be there. A store built of concrete blocks, with iron bars on the windows, and a verandah: the kind of thing that the Africans, who used to have to do their buying from Indians and white people, are beginning to go in for in the territory, now. The big mango tree was still there—a home-made sign was nailed to it: Kwacha Beer All Brands Cigarettes. There were hens, and someone whose bicycle seemed to have collapsed on its side in the heat. I said to him, "Can I go up to the house?"

He came over holding his head to one shoulder, squinting against the flies.

"Is it all right?"

He shook his head.

"Does someone live in the house, the big house?"

"Is nobody."

"I can go up and look?"

"You can go."

MOST OF THE GRAVEL was gone off the drive. There was just a hump in the middle that scraped along the underside of the low American car. The jacarandas were enormous; it was not their blooming time. It was said that Inkalamu Williamson had built this mile-and-a-half long avenue to his house after the style of the carriageway in his family estate in England; but it was more likely that, in the elevation of their social status that used to go on in people's minds when they came out to the colonies, his memory of that road to the great house was the village boy's game of imagining himself the owner as he trudged up on an errand. Inkalamu's style was that of the poor boy who has found himself the situation in which he can play at being the lordly eccentric, far from aristocrats who wouldn't so much as know he existed, and the jeers of his own kind.

I saw this now; I saw everything, now, as it had always been, and not as it had seemed to us in the time when we were children. As I came in sight of the shrubbery in front of the house, I saw that the red amaryllis, because they were indigenous anyway, continued to bloom without care or cultivation. Everything else was blurred with overgrowth. And there was the house itself; sagging under its own weight, the thatch over the dormer windows sliding toward the long grass it came from. I felt no nostalgia, only recognition.

It was a red mud house, as all our houses were then, in the early thirties, but Inkalamu had rather grandly defied the limitations of mud by building it three storeys tall, a sandcastle reproduction of a large, calendar-picture English country house, with steep thatch curving and a wide chimney at either end, and a flight of steps up to a portico. Everyone had said it would fall down on his head; it had lasted thirty years. His mango and orange trees crowded in upon it from the sides of the valley. There was the profound silence of a deserted man-made place—the silence of absence.

I tried to walk a little way into the mango grove, but year after year the crop must have been left to fall and rot, and between the rows of old trees hundreds of spindly saplings had grown up from seed, making a dark wood. I hadn't thought of going into the house, but walked round it to look for the view down the valley to the mountains that was on the other side; the rains had washed a moat at the foot of the eroded walls and I had to steady myself by holding on to the rusty elbows of plumbing

that stuck out. The house was intimately close to me, like a body. The lop-sided wooden windows on the ground floor with their tin panes, the windows of the second floor with their panes of wire mesh, hung half-open like the mouths of old people asleep. I found I could not get all the way round because the bush on the valley side had grown right to the walls, and instead I tried to pull myself up and look in. Both the mud and wattle gave way under my feet, the earth mixture crumbling and the supporting structure—branches of trees neither straightened nor dressed—that it had plastered, collapsing, hollowed by ants. The house had not fallen on Inkalamu and his black children (as the settlers had predicted) but I felt I might pull it down upon myself. Wasps hovered at my mouth and eyes: as if they, too, wanted to look inside. Inkalamu's house, that could have housed at least ten people, was not enough for them.

At the front again, I went up the steps where we used to sit scratching noughts and crosses while my father was in the house. Not that our families had been friends; only the children, which didn't count—my father and mother were white, my father a member of the Legislative Assembly, and Inkalamu's wives were native women. Sometimes my father would pay a call on Inkalamu, in the way of business (Inkalamu, as well as being a trader and hunter—the Africans had given him the name Inkalamu, "the lion"—was a big land-owner, once) but my mother never accompanied him. When my brothers and I came by ourselves, Inkalamu's children never took us into the house, it didn't seem to be *their* home in the way that our small farmhouse was our home, and perhaps their father didn't know that we came sometimes, on our own, to play, any more than our mother and father knew we secretly went there. But when we were with my father—there was a special attraction about going to that house openly, with him—we were always called in, after business was concluded, by Inkalamu Williamson, their white father, with his long yellow curly hair on to his shoulders, like Jesus, and his sun-red chest and belly folded one upon the other and visible through his unbuttoned shirt. He gave us sweets while those of his own children who had slipped inside stood in the background. We did not feel awkward, eating in front of them, for they were all shades of brown and yellow-brown, quite different from Inkalamu and my father and us.

Someone had tied the two handles of the double front door with a piece of dirty rag to prevent it from swinging open, but I looped the rag off with a stick, and it was easy to push the door and go in. The place was not quite empty. A carpenter's bench with a vice stood in the hall, some shelves had been wrenched from the wall and stood on the floor, through the archway into the sitting-room I saw a chair and papers. At first I thought someone might still be living there. It was dim inside and smelled of earth, as always. But when my eyes got accustomed to the dark I saw that the parts of the vice were welded together in rust and a frayed strip was all that was left on the rexine upholstery of the chair. Bat and mouse droppings carpeted the

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floor. Piles of books looked as if they had been dumped temporarily during a spring-cleaning; when I opened one the pages were webbed together by mould and the fine granules of red earth brought by the ants.

*The Tale of a Tub. Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill. 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.* Little old red Everymans, mixed up with numbers of *The Farmer's Weekly* and *Titbits*. This room with its crooked alcoves moulded out of mud and painted pink and green, and its pillars worm-tracked with mauve and blue by someone who had never seen marble to suggest marble to people who did not know what it was—it had never looked habitable. Inkalamu's roll-top desk, stuffed like a pigeon-loft with accounts ready to take off in any draught, used to stand on one of the uneven-boarded landings that took up more space than the dingy coops of rooms. Here in the sittingroom he would perform formalities like the distribution of sweets to us children. I don't think anyone had ever actually sat between the potted ferns and read before a real fire in that fireplace. The whole house, inside, had been curiously uninhabitable; it looked almost the real thing, but within it was not the Englishman's castle but a naive artifact, an African mud-and-wattle dream—like the VC 10 made of mealie stalks that a small African boy was hawking round the airport when I arrived the previous week.

A grille of light gleamed through the boards over my head. When Inkalamu went upstairs to fetch something, his big boots would send red sand down those spaces between the boards. He was always dressed in character, with leather leggings, and the cloudy-faced old watch on his huge round wrist held by a strap of snakeskin. I went back into the hall and had a look at the stairs. They seemed all right, except for a few missing steps. The banisters made of the hand-rails of an old tram-car were still there, and as I climbed flakes of the aluminium paint that had once covered them stuck to my palms. I had forgotten how ugly the house was upstairs, but I suppose I hadn't been up very often; it was never clear whether Inkalamu's children actually lived in the house with him or slept down at the kraal with their mothers. I think his favourite daughters lived with him sometimes—anyway, they wore shoes, and used to have ribbons for their hair, rather pretty hair, reddish-dun and curly as bubbles; I hadn't understood when I was about six and my brothers rolled on the floor giggling when I remarked that I wished I had hair like the Williamson girls. But I soon grew old enough to understand, and I used to recount the story and giggle, too.

The upstairs rooms were murmurous with wasps and the little windows were high as those of a prison-cell. How good that it was all being taken apart by insects, washed away by the rain, disappearing into the earth, carried away and digested, fragmented to compost. I was glad that Inkalamu's children were free of it, that none of them were left here in this house of that "character" of the territory, the old Africa hand whose pioneering spirit had kept their mothers down in the compound and allowed the children into the house like pets. I was glad

that the school where they weren't admitted when we were going to school was open to their children, and our settlers' club that they could never have joined was closed, and that if I met them now they would understand as I did that when I was the child who stood and ate sweets under their eyes, both they and I were what our fathers, theirs and mine, had made of us. . . . And here I was in Inkalamu Williamson's famous bathroom, the mark of his civilisation, and the marvel of the district because those very pipes sticking out of the outside walls that I had clung to represented a feat of plumbing. The lavatory pan had been taken away but the little tank with its tail of chain was still on the wall, bearing green tears of verdigris. No one had bothered to throw his medicines away. He must have had a year or two of decline before he died, there must have been an end to the swaggering and the toughness and the hunting trips and the strength of ten men: medicines had been dispensed from afar, they bore the mouldering labels of pharmacists in towns thousands of miles away—Mr. Williamson, the mixture; the pills; three times a day; when necessary; for pain. I was glad that the Williamsons were rid of their white father, and could live. Suddenly, I beat on one of the swollen windows with my fist and it flung open.

The sight there, the silence of it, smoking heat, was a hand laid to quiet me. Right up to the house the bush had come, the thorn trees furry with yellow blossom, the overlapping umbrellas of rose, plum and green *msasa*, the shouldering mahogany with castanet pods, and far up on either side, withdrawn, moon-mountainous, the granite peaks, lichen-spattered as if the roc perched there and left its droppings. The exaltation of emptiness was taken into my lungs. I opened my mouth and received it. Good God, that valley!

And yet I did not stand there long. I went down the broken stairs and out of the house, leaving the window hanging like the page of an open book, adding my destruction to all the others just as careless that were bringing the house to the ground; more rain would come in, more swifts and bats to nest. But it is the ants who bring the grave to the house, in the end. As I pushed the swollen front doors roughly closed behind me I saw them, in their moving chair-room life to death, carrying in the grains of red earth that will cover it.

They were black, with bodies the shapes of egg-timers. I looked up from them, guilty at waste of time, when I felt someone watching me. In the drive there was a young man without shoes, his hands arranged as if he had an imaginary hat in them. I said good morning in the language of the country, it suddenly came to my mouth, and he asked me for work. Standing on the steps before the Williamsons' house, I laughed: "I don't live here. It's empty."

"I have been one year without a work," he said mouthingly in English, perhaps as a demonstration of an additional qualification.

I said, "I'm sorry. I live very far from here."

"I am cooking and garden too," he said. Then we did not know what to say to each other. I went to the car and gave him two

shillings out of my bag and he did something I hadn't seen since I was a child, and one of Inkalamu's servants used to take something from him—he went on his knees, clapped once, and made a bowl of his hands to receive the money.

I BUMPED AND ROCKED down the drive from that house that I should never see again, whose instant in time was already forgotten, re-named, like the public buildings and streets of the territory—it didn't matter how they did it. I only hoped that the old man had left plenty of money for those children of his, Joyce, Bessie—what were the other ones' names?—to enjoy now that they were citizens of their mothers' country. At the junction with the main road the bicycle on its side and the man were still there, and a woman was standing on the verandah of the store with a little girl. I thought she might have something to do with the people who owned the land, now, and that I ought to make some sort of acknowledgment for having entered the property, so I greeted her through the car window, and she said, "Was the road very bad?"

"Thank you, no. Thank you very much."  
"Usually people walks up when they come, now. I'm afraid to let them take the cars. And when it's been raining!"

She had come down to the car with the smile of someone for whom the historic ruin is simply a place to hang the washing. She was young, Portuguese, or perhaps Indian, with piled curls of dull hair and large black eyes, inflamed and watering. She wore tarnished gilt earrings and a peacock brooch, but her feet swished across the sand in felt slippers. The child had sore eyes, too; the flies were at her.

"Did you buy the place, then?" I said.  
"It's my father's" she said, "he died about seven years ago."

"Joyce" I said. "It's Joyce!"  
She laughed like a child made to stand up in class. "I'm Nonny, the baby. Joyce is the next one, the one before."

Nonny. I used to push her round on my bicycle, her little legs hanging from the knees over the handlebars. I told her who I was, ready to exchange family news. But of course our families had never been friends. She had never been in our house. So I said, "I couldn't go past without going to see if Inkalamu Williamson's house was still there."

"Oh yes," she said. "Quite often people comes to look at the house. But it's in a terrible mess."

"And the others? Joyce, and Bessie, and Roger—?"

They were in this town or that; she was no even sure which, in the case of some of them.

"Well, that's good," I said. "It's different here now, there's so much to do, in the territory. I told her I had been at the independence celebrations; I was conscious, with a stab of satisfaction at the past, that we could share now a

we had never been able to.  
"That's nice," she said.

"—And you're still here. The only one of us still here! Is it a long time since it was lived in?" The house was there, out of sight, behind us.

"My mother and I was there till—how long now—five years ago,"—she was smiling and holding up her hand to keep the light from hurting her eyes—"but what can a person do there, it's so far from the road. So I started this little place." Her smile took me into the confidence of the empty road, the hot morning, the single customer with his bicycle. "Well, I must try. What can you do?"

I asked, "And the other farms, I remember the big tobacco farm on the other side of the river?"

"Oh that, that was gone long before he died. I don't know what happened to the farms. We found out he didn't have them any more, he must have sold them, I don't know . . . or what. He left the brothers a tobacco farm—you know, the two older brothers, not from my mother, from the second mother—but it came out the bank had it already. I don't know. My father never talk to us about these business things, you know."

"But you've got this farm." We were of the new generation, she and I. "You could sell it, I'm sure. Land values are going to rise again. They're prospecting all over this area between

the bauxite mines and the capital. Sell it and—well, do—you could go where you like."

"It's just the house. From the house to the road. Just this little bit" she said, and laughed. "The rest was sold before he died. It's just the house, that he left to my mother. But you got to live, I mean."

I said warmly, "The same with my father! Our farm was ten thousand acres. And there was more up at Lebishe. If he'd have hung on to Lebishe alone we'd have made a fortune when the platinum deposits were found."

But of course it was not quite the same. She said sympathetically, "Really!" to me with my university-modulated voice. We were smiling at each other, one on either side of the window of the big American car. The child, with bows in its hair, hung on to her hand; the flies bothered its small face.

"You couldn't make some sort of hotel, I suppose."

"It's in a mess," she said, assuming the tone of a flighty, apologetic housewife. "I built this little place here for us and we just left it. It's so much rubbish there still."

"Yes, and the books. All those books. The ants are eating them." I smiled at the little girl as people without children of their own do. Behind, there was the store, and the cottage like the backyard quarters provided for servants in

white houses. "Doesn't anyone want the books?"

"We don't know what to do with them. We just left them. Such a lot of books my father collected up." After all, I knew her father's eccentricities.

"And the mission school at Balondji's been taken over and made into a pretty good place?" I seemed to remember that Joyce and one of the brothers had been there; probably all Inkalamu's children. It was no longer a school meant for black children, as it had been in our time. But she seemed to have only a polite general interest: "Yes, somebody said something the other day."

"You went to school there, didn't you, in the old days?"

She giggled at herself and moved the child's arm. "I never been away from here."

"Really? Never!"

"My father taught me a bit. You'll even see the schoolbooks among that lot up there. Really."

"Well, I suppose the shop might become quite a nice thing," I said.

She said, "If I could get a licence for brandy, though. It's only beer, you see. If I could get a licence for brandy . . . I'm telling you, I'd get the men coming." She giggled.

[continued on p.156]

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## The First Novel

Gerald Moore



*The Interpreters* by Wole Soyinka (Andre Deutsch)

"Well, if I'm to reach the mines by three, I'd better move," I said.

She kept smiling to please me; I began to think she didn't remember me at all; why should she, she had been no bigger than her little daughter when I used to take her on the handlebars of my bicycle. But she said, "I'll bring my mother. She's inside." She turned and the child turned with her and they went into the shade of the verandah and into the store. In a moment they came out with a thin black woman bent either by age or in greeting—I was not sure. She wore a head-cloth and a full long skirt of the minutely-patterned blue-and-white cotton that used to be in bales on the counter of every store, in my childhood. I got out of the car and shook hands with her. She clapped and made an obeisance, never looking at me. She was very thin with a narrow breast covered by a shrunken yellow blouse pulled together by a flower with gaps like those of missing teeth in its coloured glass corolla. Before the three of them, I turned to the child rubbing at her eyes with hands tangled in the tendrils of her hair. "So you've a daughter of your own now, Nonny."

She giggled and swung her forward.

I said to the little girl, "What's hurting you, dear?—Something wrong with her eyes?"

"Yes. It's all red and sore. Now I've got it too, but not so bad."

"It's conjunctivitis," I said. "She's infected you. You must go to the doctor."

She smiled and said, "I don't know what it is. She had it two weeks now."

Then we shook hands and I thought: I mustn't touch my face until I can wash them.

"You're going to Kalondwe, to the mine." The engine was running. She stood with her arms across her breasts, the attitude of one who is left behind.

"Yes, I believe old Dr. Madley's back in the territory, he's at the W.H.O. centre there." Dr. Madley had been the only doctor in the district when we were all children.

"Oh yes" she said in her exaggeratedly interested, conversational manner. "He didn't know my father was dead, you know, he came to see him!"

"I'll tell him I've seen you, then."

"Yes, tell him." She made the little girl's limp fat hand wave goodbye, pulling it away from her eyes—"Naughty, naughty." I suddenly remembered—"What's your name now, by the way?"; the times were gone when nobody ever bothered to know the married names of women who weren't white. And I didn't want to refer to her as Inkalamu's daughter. Thank God she was free of him, and the place he and his kind had made for her. All that was dead, Inkalamu was dead.

She stood twiddling her earrings, bridling, smiling, her face not embarrassed but warmly bashful with open culpability, "Oh just Miss Williamson. Tell him Nonny."

I turned carefully on to the tar, I didn't want to leave with my dust in their faces. As I gathered speed I saw in the mirror that she still had the child by the wrist, waving its hand to me.

WOLE SOYINKA'S NOVEL will surprise his admirers. Not only has he moved into this new medium with authority; he has written the first African novel that has a texture of real complexity and depth. By comparison with it most of the others undeniably take on the look of simple, rather one-track moral fables or, as in the case of Cyprian Ekwensi, mere episodic entertainments. Soyinka has dramatically raised the bidding. From now on we shall expect more of African novelists. And, let us hope, the last strains of amazed patronage and condescending kindness will disappear from the literary criticism they get.

*The Interpreters* is, at one level, an exploration of the lives and relationships of a small group of friends living more or less professional lives on the perilous and bumpy axis of Ibadan-Lagos. It is also a merciless satire upon the social pretensions of the Nigerian bourgeoisie. And it is a series of lonely, separate accounts of each man's search for the roots of his own living, sometimes assisted, sometimes distracted by the demands of friendship and love. For the interpreters of the title are Soyinka's little band of friends, each seeking to interpret and express in himself a portion of the gods' mysterious will. There is a continual and exciting interplay between the demands of this quest and the social occasions in which their paths continually cross and recross. Thus a man may finally discover himself amid the trodden sandwiches and powdered sweat of a garden party. Thus Monica and Kola discover each other, in one of Soyinka's funniest scenes, amid the frozen social acres of the Professor's party.

NO LESS REMARKABLE than the balance of this complex dance which makes up the book's structure is the fullness with which Soyinka has realised several of his people. Perhaps he was helped in this by giving to each of them some aspect of himself. One or two of them, it is true, are no more than foils for the rest to "stick fiery off indeed." Such is Lasunwon, the lawyer-politician. And Simi, the "international courtesan" with her notorious and irresistible beauty, is a somewhat conventional figure. But Egbo, Kola, Sagoe, Bandele and Sekoni move through the book with equal conviction and it would be hard to say which interests us, or the author, most. Perhaps Egbo has a slight edge. Having rejected the spurious solution offered to him at the opening of the novel, the opportunity to become the young, enlightened ruler of his

town in the Niger creeks, he returns to his Foreign Office job in Lagos. We hear nothing of the latter, which is no doubt an indication of its importance in his life. Instead we see him move helplessly into a demanding affair with Simi which completes his sexual education and prepares the way for his spiritual one. In a night of terror spent on the rocks under the Ogun River railway bridge he allows the presence of the god to flow through him. But Egbo has not truly found what he is seeking until he has made love and begotten a son in the same spot. And the girl he chooses is not Simi, who cannot survive such an encounter, but an unknown student who presents herself, anonymously and almost dumbly, on the appointed day.

Water is the element which challenges Egbo's being most deeply. He has known this ever since the treacherous current of the creeks claimed his father and mother but threw him back into life and air. He knew it again in boyhood when he used to lie beside the Oshun River in the grove at Oshogbo and gaze into the slowly moving stream, or further up at the bridge, watch the sunlit water pouring over the stones:

"There was depth also in that turbulence, at least I felt down into darkness from an unfettered sky. It was so different from the grove where depth swamped me; at the bridge it was elusive, you had to pierce it, arrowed like a bird."

For in the end it is for the bridge itself, rather than the bridged element, that all of them are seeking. Egbo's fate finds him out as he lies heaving upon the body of the strange girl at Ilugun while the Lagos trains thunder overhead. The doomed, tormented engineer Sekoni who once stammered:

"The bridge is the dome of religion and bridges don't just go from here to there; a bridge also faces backwards"

meets his death while driving too hard at a bridge. And Kola the artist, who has been searching throughout the novel for a model who will stand in his great canvas and unite its many figures into a single vision, finds him at last in Lazarus, the albino evangelist, "the bridge of moonbeam, piercing sky and earth, slight as a ghost and weary as the resurrection." Even the cynical Sagoe, who offers only an obsession with ordure as his theory of life, finds his bridge in the hard, loving body of Dehinwa. While Bandele, the quiet subtle man who never breaks his communications with anyone, seems to find his fulfilment in guiding the others towards theirs.

Such meanings lie somewhere beneath the surface of a novel which is full of wit, biting observation, humour, incident and variety. Set out like this they may appear lugubrious, but there is nothing lugubrious about their busy, flushed interpreters. Soyinka himself defines the book in a single line when he says of Egbo: "Mentally he surrendered the effort of unravelling blood-skins and was left only with their tyrannous energies." For the bridge they all seek is essentially one uniting the living and the dead, through which these tyrannous energies may flow.