move for days. Listening to Talent was like sitting with my brother talking about war. A war ends, you bury the dead, you look after the cripples – but everywhere among ordinary people is this army whose wounds don't show: the numbed, or the brutalised, or those who can never, not really, believe in the innocence of life".

If the strongest impression of Lessing's first visit to Zimbabwe was that too much was expected of the country only two years after the end of a very brutal civil war, in 1988 she identifies as the main theme: "how much a small thing, a single building, or animal, or little garden, or a dedicated person can mean, transforming a whole district.

"Petr Simbisai wants me to see a certain shed. It is a large plain lock-up shed with a cement floor. It is communally owned ... each family not only had to put money into the materials to build the shed, but then help build it, and afterwards look after it. Someone always had to be there: this afternoon it was a young woman whose turn had come on the roster. She said that most families had left the scheme, leaving a nucleus who had built it up, and now people wanted to join it again, because it was changing the life of the area.

"In the shed is a weighing machine for the sacks of produce, and to weigh people when doctors and nurses come. There is a heap of maize, seed maize, tinted blue and green as a warning not to eat it or feed animals with it

'I could not talk like this then. It would have sounded an irrelevance: at best, like one of the eccentricities the whites go in for'

... In the shed, too, political meetings are held, educational classes of all kinds, and parties. The owners of the shed are proud its facilities are available to everyone, members or not, that it is a centre for the whole area, and such a success that other people in neighbouring areas are talking about building a similar centre."

One of the most tragic themes of *African Laughter* (to this middle-class ecofeminist) is the destruction of the land wreaked by poverty, ignorance and a terrifying population explosion. Lessing first mentions it like this: "When I returned to Zimbabwe after that long absence, I expected all kinds of changes, but there was one change I had not thought to expect. The game had mostly gone. The bush was nearly silent."

Later, she picks up three black men on the side of the road ("they were all three middle-aged, or at least, not young. They were shabby. But they were amiable and I knew I had found what I had been wanting, people of the country, black people, I could talk with. Talk, that is, without being overheard by antagonistic whites, by the new breed of ideological blacks"). They ask her what changes she has noticed since she left for England so long ago. Lessing writes:

"I wanted to talk about the emptying and thinning of the bush, how the animals had gone, and the birds and the insects, how this meant everything had changed; how myriads of small balances, hundreds in every small patch of bush, necessary for water, soil, foliage, climate, had been disturbed. I had already begun to suspect that these changes were more important than, even, the War, and the overthrow of the whites, the coming of the black government. Now, years later, I am sure of it. But I could not talk like this to these people then, at that time. It would have sounded an irrelevance: at best, like one of the eccentricities the whites go in for.

"It is, I think, almost a law that what one is afraid to say because it will be rejected by the atmosphere of a time, will turn out to be a few years later the most important thing of all."

Two sounds ring through one's head after reading this book – the laughter of the title ("he shook with laughter, the marvelous African laughter born somewhere in the gut, seizing the whole body with good-humoured philosophy"); and the cry of the emerald spotted wood dove: "my mother is dead, my child is dead, oh oh oh oh." The one does not silence the other.

Shauna Westcott is a freelance journalist currently working in Idasa's media department.

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