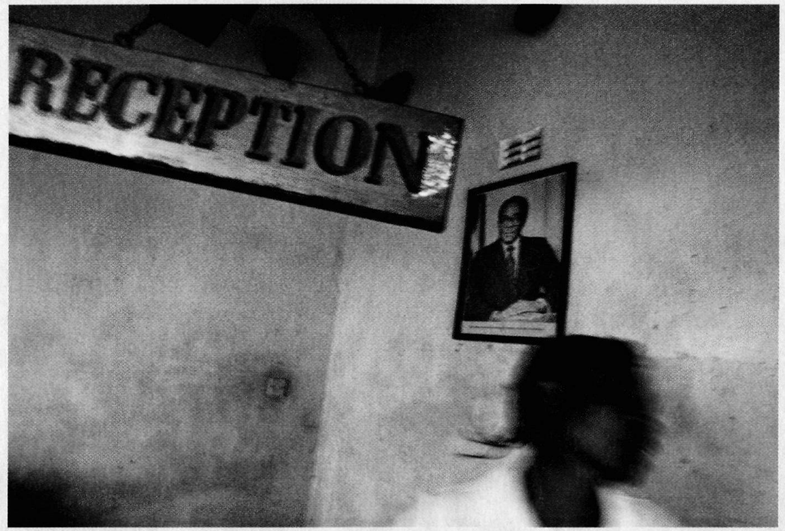
hang" for plotting "monkey business" against his country, and members of the opposition, who "will get bashed." A few weeks earlier, I caught a television interview on his 83rd birthday. "Some people say I am a dictator," he said at his 25-bedroom villa in the capital, Harare, complete with Italian-marble bathrooms and roof tiles from Shanghai. "My own people say I am handsome."

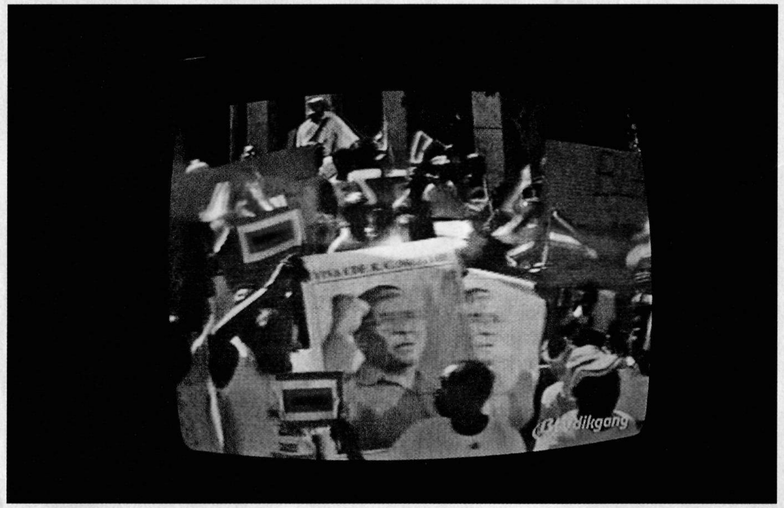
MY 10-MINUTE CONVERSATION WITH THE miner in West Nicholson turned out to be my last interview. The plainclothes officers brought me to the West Nicholson police station, where I spent the night. The next day I was driven north to the provincial police headquarters at Gwanda. My escorts accused me of planning to write "negative" stories about Zimbabwe—as if arresting me would dispose me to more positive stories—and carried with them a report from West Nicholson's police chief describing me as a "dedicated journalist on a clandestine mission."

At Gwanda, I was interrogated by a series of detectives and was denied a lawyer and a phone call. Officers crowded in to see me. They were excited. One said he wanted to "manhandle" me. Two others grinned and bounced before me, trying to make me flinch. The detective in charge of my case introduced himself as "Moyo" and disclosed that he approved of a beating if the crime warranted it. I was driven to the prosecutors' office and charged with breaching sections 79 and 80, Chapter 10: 27, of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, "working as a journalist without accreditation." The maximum sentence was two years.

"Do you think I can just come to your country, start asking questions and write anything I want?" demanded an officer. Nobody knew I was here, I replied. Nobody knew what was happening to me. I didn't know what was happening to me. Could I call someone? Moyo ignored me. His officers expressed outrage at my nerve.

The only feature in my cell aside from walls and bars was an iron shackling ring in the floor. Prisoners at Gwanda are paraded every morning before the station's officers





'It's a brain drain. All the intelligent people—the doctors, the lawyers, the teachers—have left.'
—ARCHBISHOP PIUS NCUBE

Ghost world *The collapse of living standards and Mugabe's authoritarian rule have turned the once prosperous country into an eerie police state. From top, the reception area of a hotel displays a photograph of the President; a pro-Mugabe demonstration as seen on a television in Bulawayo; tourists at Victoria Falls*

and, one by one, interrogated and slapped, humiliated. Some of my fellow prisoners had been arrested for trapping porcupines in the forest, selling gasoline, stealing—petty offenses committed in desperate efforts to feed their families. A piece of graffiti on the wall read, P. MOYO WAS HERE FOR STANDING.

The prisoners weren't the only ones living in fear. Junior officers barely opened their mouths. Ranking officers like Moyo would not grant me permission to visit the toilet or brush my teeth without approval from their superiors. "I am just a worker," I heard the police-station chief say. "There are people above me." The jailers' anxiety about their bosses made them even more determined to demand respect from their prisoners. Moyo considered my demand for a lawyer insulting. "I am educated," he said. "And you do not cooperate." The walls of his office made clear that the regime saw the opposition less as a threat than an affront. The top crime on a list hanging above Moyo's desk was "insulting or undermining the authority of the President."

In truth, Zimbabwe's opposition remains weak. The main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (M.D.C.), peaked in 2002, when leader Morgan Tsvangirai polled 42% to Mugabe's 56% in presidential elections. Since then the anti-Mugabe movement has foundered because of infighting and intimidation. Mugabe has unleashed a campaign of beatings, mass arrests and shootings of his political opponents. On March 11, state police attacked a joint M.D.C.-Christian march. Tsvangirai was taken into custody and beaten savagely. Since 2000, Mugabe has also encouraged mobs to invade farms owned by the country's remaining white residents, who number in the tens of thousands and mainly back the opposition. The M.D.C.'s principal base is in the urban slums, so Mugabe destroyed many of them, forcing millions of shanty dwellers into the streets or exile. The opposition called a general strike on April 2, but it's hard for a strike to have much impact when many of its potential supporters are outside the country.

Mugabe has also targeted some longstanding foreign adversaries. The West, particularly Britain and the U.S., is plotting to recolonize Zimbabwe, he says. That paranoia courses through every level of the country's security apparatus. A large map in Inspector Moyo's office highlighted in red "areas of political activity"—which turned out to be every town or large village. A directive on the wall reminded him his job was to "investigate all cases of a political nature, suppress all civil commotion and gather political intelligence." There was even a detailed procedure in case the station ever came under attack. Fear and vigilance combined in an obsession with paperwork. Every remark I made was typed in triplicate. I was fingerprinted five times.

Moyo seemed to realize he was working for the bad guys. "The country is ruined," he said one day. Shame fueled his need for respect. He was haunted by the prospect of someday being called to account for the abuses he has overseen. "You cannot say anything against me," he would say. Mugabe's greatest trick is to make sure people fear him more than they hate him, and hate themselves most of all.

For all of Zimbabwe's privations, Mugabe's hold on power seems unlikely to slip anytime soon. On my first day in jail, a heads-of-government Southern African Development Community summit met in Tanzania. In its ranks were other veterans of the fight against colonialism, like South African President Thabo Mbeki, many of whose supporters sympathize with Mugabe's demonization of the West as racist. Despite worldwide calls for censure, the conference refused to condemn Mugabe's leadership and affirmed Zimbabwe's right to noninterference. Mbeki was asked to act as mediator between the government and the opposition, but Mbeki told the *Financial Times*, "Whether we succeed or not is up to the Zimbabwean leadership. None of us in the region has any power to force the Zimbabweans to agree." The next day Zimbabwe's ruling party, the Zanu-PF, endorsed Mugabe as its candidate for the 2008 presidential election.

I STUDIED THE MAPS ON MOYO'S WALLS FOR escape routes into South Africa or Botswana. What encouraged me was that I would hardly be the first to flee Zimbabwe. There are no reliable estimates of how much of the original population has left. Some estimates range from 2 million to 4 million; South Africans reckon they host 1 million to 2 million refugees. Shantytowns with names like Little Harare and Zimtown have sprung up outside cities across Africa. The stories their inhabitants tell—of risking crocodiles in the Limpopo River and lions in South Africa's Kruger National Park in their bid to escape—speak of desperation. They also illuminate why any recovery in Zimbabwe will be a long time coming. "It's a brain drain," says Archbishop Pius Ncube, a prominent government critic based in Bulawayo. "All the intelligent people—the doctors, the lawyers, the teachers—have left." Through the bars of my cell, wardens would quietly ask if I could help them find jobs in London.

I began to see my captors as victims as much as persecutors. Many had not been paid. A drive to Bulawayo, ostensibly to search my hotel room, became a shopping trip as five officers crammed the car and spent the day hunting roadside stalls for cheap tomatoes, queuing at gas stations and ATMS, seeking out a country butcher with a reputation for value. "I cannot lie to you. The situation is very bad," said Moyo. "You can see for yourself."

On my fifth day in detention, I was taken to court. En route, Moyo took me to a café for my first meal since my arrest. I was amazed to see an English breakfast on offer: sausages, eggs, toast, coffee. I hungrily ordered and sat down—only to see Moyo sit at an adjacent table. I beckoned to him, but, head down, he demurred. A man asked to share my table and introduced himself as a manager for the Christian relief organization World Vision. I asked him about this year's harvest. "There's zero," he said. "No crop. Millions of hungry people, and just our maize sacks to feed them."

Court took 10 minutes. I pleaded guilty and was fined 100 Zimbabwean dollars—at present values, half a U.S. cent. Outside, two men in suits and sunglasses, possibly secret-service agents, watched as I left court. Though the local authorities had let me go, there was no guarantee I would avoid being interrogated again by Mugabe's secret police. I jumped in my rental car and, calculating that the authorities would expect me to head south to South Africa or west to Botswana, drove 60 km north to Zambia. An hour after nightfall, the road became muddy. It seemed to be raining. A rumbling filled the air. I looked left, and there, silver in the moonlight, framed between two cliffs, was Victoria Falls. I was out.

My last night in jail was a Sunday. I was falling asleep on the floor when I felt a low harmony echoing up through the concrete of the cell next door. There was bass, tenor and rhythm. For two hours, prisoners filled the jail with music. These were songs of suffering and acceptance, of beauty and soul undiminished. ■