TELLING TIMES

Writing and Living, 1954–2008

NADINE GORDIMER

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE

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Growing up in one part of a vast young country can be very different from growing up in another, and in South Africa this difference is not only a matter of geography. The division of the people into two great races – black and white – and the subdivision of the white into Afrikaans- and English-speaking groups provides a diversity of cultural heritage that can make two South African children seem almost as strange to each other as if they had come from different countries. The fact that their parents, if they are English-speaking, frequently have come from different countries complicates their backgrounds still further. My father came to South Africa from a village in Russia; my mother was born and grew up in London. I remember, when I was about eight years old, going with my sister and mother and father to spend a long weekend with a cousin of my father's who lived in the Orange Free State. After miles and miles of sienna-red ploughed earth, after miles and miles of silk-fringed mealies standing as high as your eyes on either side of the road and ugly farmhouses where women in bunchy cotton dresses and sun-bonnets stared after the car as we passed (years later, when I saw *Oklahoma!* in a Johannesburg theatre, I recalled that scene), we reached the dorp where the cousin lived in a small white house with sides that were dust-stained in a wavering wash, like rust, for more than a foot above the ground. There we two little girls slept on beds of a smothering softness we had never felt before – feather beds brought from Eastern Europe – and drank tea drawn from a charming contraption, a samovar. There – to our and our mother's horror – we were given smoked duck, flavoured with garlic, at breakfast. The two children of the house spoke only Afrikaans,

like the Boer children who played in the yards of the mean little houses on either side, and my sister and I, queasy from the strange food and able to speak only English, watched their games with a mixture of hostility and wistfulness.

How different it all was from our visit to our mother's sister, in Natal! There, with the 'English' side of the family, in the green, softly contoured hills and the gentle meadows of sweet grass near Balgowan, we might almost have been in England itself. There our cousins Roy and Humphrey rode like young lords about their father's beautiful farm, and spoke the high, polite, 'pure' English learned in expensive Natal private schools that were staffed with masters imported from English universities. And how different were both visits from our life in one of the gold-mining towns of the Witwatersrand, near Johannesburg, in the Transvaal.

There are nine of these towns, spread over a distance of roughly a hundred and forty miles east and west of Johannesburg. The one in which we lived was on the east side – the East Rand, it is called – and it had many distinctions, as distinctions are measured in that part of the world. First of all, it was one of the oldest towns, having got itself a gold strike, a general store, a few tents and a name before 1890. In the pioneer days, my father had set himself up in a small, one-man business as a watchmaker and jeweller, and during the twenties and thirties, when the town became the most rapidly expanding on the Witwatersrand, he continued to live there with his family. In the richest gold-mining area in the world, it became the richest square mile or so. All around us, the shafts went down and the gold came up; our horizon was an Egyptian-looking frieze of man-made hills of cyanide sand, called 'dumps', because that is what they are – great mounds of waste matter dumped on the surface of the earth after the gold-bearing ore has been blasted below, hauled up, and pounded and washed into yielding its treasure. In the dusty month before spring – in August, that is – the sand from the dumps blew under the tightly shut doors of every house in the town and enveloped the heads of the dumps themselves in a swirling haze, lending them some of

the dignity of cloud-capped mountains. It is characteristic of the Witwatersrand that any feature of the landscape that strikes the eye always does so because it is a reminder of something else; considered on its own merits, the landscape is utterly without interest – flat, dry, and barren.

In our part of the East Rand, the yellowish-white pattern of the cyanide dumps was broken here and there by the head of a black hill rising out of the veld. These hills were man-made, too, but they did not have the geometrical, pyramidal rigidity of the cyanide dumps, and they were so old that enough real earth had blown on to them to hold a growth of sparse grass and perhaps even a sinewy peppercorn or peach tree, sprung up, no doubt, out of garden refuse abandoned there by somebody from the nearby town. These hills were also dumps, but through their scanty natural covering a blackness clearly showed – even a little blueness, the way black hair shines – for they were coal dumps, made of coal dust.

The coal dumps assumed, both because of their appearance and because of the stories and warnings we heard about them, something of a diabolical nature. In our sedate little colonial tribe, with its ritual tea parties and tennis parties, the coal dump could be said to be our Evil Mountain; I use the singular here because when I think of these dumps, I think of one in particular – the biggest one, the one that stood fifty yards beyond the last row of houses in the town where we lived. I remember it especially well because on the other side of it, hidden by it, was the local nursing home, where, when my sister and I were young and the town was small, all the mothers went to have their babies and all the children went to have their tonsillectomies – where, in fact, almost everyone was born, endured an illness, or died. Our mother had several long stays in the place, over a period of two or three years, and during these stays our grandmother took us on a daily visit across the veld to see her. Immediately lunch was over, she would spend an hour dressing us, and then, brushed and beribboned and curled, we would set off. We took a path that skirted the coal dump, and there it was at our side most of the way – a dirty, scarred old mountain, collapsing into the fold of a small ravine here, supporting a twisted peach

tree there, and showing bald and black through patchy grass. A fence consisting of two threads of barbed wire looped at intervals through low rusted-iron poles, which once had surrounded it completely, now remained only in places, conveying the idea of a taboo rather than providing an effectual means of isolation. The whole coal dump looked dead, forsaken, and harmless enough, but my sister and I walked softly and looked at it out of the corners of our eyes, half fascinated, half afraid, because we knew it was something else – inert. Not dead by any means, but inert. For we had *seen*. Coming back from the nursing home in the early-winter dusk, we had seen the strange glow in the bald patches the grass did not cover, and in the runnels made by the erosion of summer wind and rain we had seen the hot blue waver of flame. The coal dump was alive. Like a beast of prey, it woke to life in the dark.

The matter-of-fact truth was that these coal dumps, relics of the pre-gold-strike era when collieries operated in the district, were burning. Along with the abandoned mine workings underground, they had caught fire at some time or other in their years of disuse, and had continued to burn, night and day, ever since. Neither rain nor time could put the fires out, and in some places, even on the coldest winter days, we would be surprised to feel the veld warm beneath the soles of our shoes, and, if we cut out a clod, faintly steaming. That dump on the outskirts of the town where we lived is still burning today. I have asked people who have studied such things how long it may be expected to go on burning before it consumes itself. Nobody seems to know; it shares with the idea of Hades its heat and vague eternity.

But perhaps its fierce heart is being subdued gradually. Apparently, no one can even remember, these days, the nasty incidents connected with the dump, incidents that were fresh in memory during our childhood. Perhaps there is no need for anyone to remember, for the town now has more vicarious and less dangerous excitements to offer children than the thrill of running quickly across a pile of black dust that may at any moment cave in and plunge the adventurer into a bed of incandescent coals. In our time, we knew a girl to whom this had happened, and our mother

remembered a small boy who had disappeared entirely under a sudden landslide of terrible glowing heat. Not even his bones had been recovered, but the girl we knew survived to become a kind of curiosity about the town. She had been playing on the dump with her friends, and all at once had found herself sunk thigh-deep in living coals and hot ashes. Her friends had managed to pull her out of this fiery quicksand, but she was horribly burned. When we saw her in the street, we used to be unable to keep our eyes from the tight-puckered skin of her calves, and the still tighter skin of her hands, which drew up her fingers like claws. Despite, or because of, these awful warnings, my sister and I longed to run quickly across the lower slopes of the dump for ourselves, and several times managed to elude surveillance long enough to do so. And once, in the unbearable terror and bliss of excitement, we clutched each other on the veld below while, legs pumping wildly, our cousin Roy, come from Natal to spend the holidays with us, rode a bicycle right to the top of the dump and down the other side, triumphant and unharmed.

In the part of South Africa where we lived, we had not only fire under our feet; we had, too, a complication of tunnels as intricate as one of those delicate chunks of worm cast you find on the seashore. All the towns along the Witwatersrand, and the older parts of Johannesburg itself, are undermined. Living there, you think about it as little as you think about the fact that, whatever your work and whatever your life, your reason for performing it where you do and living it where you do is the existence of the gold mines. Yet you are never allowed to forget entirely that the ground is not solid beneath you. In Johannesburg, sitting eight or ten storeys up, in the office of your stockbroker or in your dentist's waiting room, you feel the strong shudder of an earth tremor; the vase of flowers skids towards the magazines on the table, the gossip of the ticker-tape machine is drowned. These tremors, never strong enough to do any serious damage, are commonplace. By ascribing them to the fact that the Witwatersrand is extensively undermined, I am inadvertently taking sides in a long, discreet controversy between the seismologists and the Chamber of Mines. The seismologists say

that the tremors are not, geologically speaking, earth tremors at all but are caused by rocks falling from the ceilings of either working or abandoned mines. The Chamber of Mines insists that they are natural and not man-caused phenomena. And jerry-builders take advantage of the dispute, greeting the evidence of cracked walls in houses with a shrug of the shoulders that lets the responsibility fall on God or the Chamber of Mines, take your choice.

Our life in the mining town, in one of the ugliest parts of a generally beautiful continent, was narrow and neighbourly – a way of life that, while it commonly produces a violent reaction of rebelliousness in adolescence, suits young children very well. The town had sprung into existence because of the mines, had grown up around the mines. The shopkeepers had come – first with their tents, then with their shanties, and, at last, with their corner sites and neon signs – to fill and profit from the miners' needs. At the start, the miners wanted only the necessities of life – stoves and workmen's clothing and meat. Soon they wanted everything – cinemas and shiny wooden cocktail cabinets and tinned asparagus. My father's little business was a good example of how trade grew into the full feather of provincial luxury from scrawny beginnings in utility. When he arrived in the town, just before the Boer War, he used to tramp from mine to mine carrying a cardboard suitcase full of pocket watches. The watches sold for less than a dollar each. They ticked as loudly as the crocodile who pursues Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, and they were as strong as they sounded. They were a necessity for the mine-workers, who found that ordinary watches became rusted and ruined in no time by the damp and heat underground. So my father, a tiny, dapper, small-featured youth with feet no bigger than a woman's, made his living by selling watches to, and repairing watches for, the great, hefty Afrikaners and the tough Scots and Irishmen who produced gold. He had a little wood-and-iron cottage, where he lived with a black retriever named Springbok, two German roller canaries, and his watchmaker's worktable.

By the time my father married my mother, he was living in the newly built local hotel, owned a horse and trap, and had rented a

glass-fronted shop, where he sold diamond engagement rings. By the time my sister and I were old enough to notice such things, his shop had showcases full of silver sports cups, walnut mantel clocks, stainless-steel cutlery, and costume jewellery from America and Czechoslovakia. A stone-deaf relative had been imported from Leningrad to do the watch repairing; he sat behind an engraved glass partition, out of sight of the customers, who were now townspeople – the families of other shopkeepers, municipal officials, civil servants – as well as white workers from the mines. The white miners wore the new Swiss water-and-shock-proof watches. The only potential customers for cheap pocket watches were now the tribal Africans – migrant labourers who were employed to do all the really hard work in the mines – and these bewildered men, still wearing earrings and dressed in ochre-dyed blankets, mostly made their purchases at government-concession stores on mine property and did not venture into a jeweller's shop in the town.

The mine people and the townspeople did not by any means constitute a homogeneous population; they remained two well-defined groups. Socially, the mine people undoubtedly had the edge on the people of the town. Their social hierarchy had been set up first, and was the more rigid and powerful. There was a general manager before there was a mayor. But even when the town did create civic dignitaries for itself, even when we did get a country club, there were those among us who neither knew nor cared about the social scaffolding that was going up around them, whereas at each mine the G.M. was not only the leader of society but also the boss, and if one did not revere him as the first, one had to respect him as the second. The dignitaries on both sides – the G.M.s and their officials from the mines, and the city fathers, the presidents of clubs in the town, and so on – invited each other to dinners and receptions, and the teams of the sports clubs of mine and town competed with each other, but there was little mixing on the more intimate levels of sociability. The mine officials and their wives and families lived on 'the property'; that is, the area of ground, sometimes very large, that belonged to each mine and that included, in addition to the shaft heads and the mine offices and the hospital, a