


LAURENS VAN DER POST

# About Blady

## A Pattern out of Time

A Memoir



"Vivid recollections  
of bush and desert  
in the Kalahari . . .  
There is abundant  
drama and range  
in van der Post's  
experiences."

—*The New York  
Times Book Review*

A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK

# ABOUT BLADY

## *A Pattern Out of Time*

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LAURENS VAN DER POST



A Harvest/HBJ Book  
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers  
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*For  
Frances Mirrietjie  
and her Mediterranean heart,  
with love*

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# I

## *Floating Things*

Although the story becomes specific only in Blady, it does not begin there. That is the trouble when writing about the truth as we have experienced it. Fiction has its own truth. It is a truth which is innocent and flexible in a way that what one so naively calls actuality is not. Whatever conceives and directs the patterns of the stories told from the beginning of human life to this day, the storyteller has all sorts of advantages which the reporter of the truth, with which I am concerned, does not possess.

Take this matter of beginnings. The storyteller can choose his moment of entry into this awesome continuum of time and space and all its relativities, and compel their obedience to the story. He can lengthen or foreshorten time and manipulate its mysterious partner, space, and move freely backwards and forwards in the interests of the drama which must heighten the perception and expectations of the reality of his listeners. He can dispose of fifty years in a paragraph, and prolong for many pages the calm before the storm which he must call forth for the climax of his story, so that what is but a moment of great meaning in the progression of the story feels as if it is lasting for a century, and all that has gone before and comes after, which in real life may take many years to rise up and dissolve, can vanish as if they had been but an instant.

He can marry outer eventfulness with the inner eventfulness of a story that imagination bound to the here and now cannot do, because the truth of life will only yield to the truth attained in a pattern that has been lived. It is never just an outer event. It is always more than the statistics and the appearances in what a Zen monk, in the cool of a great Zen Buddhist temple in



Kyoto one early afternoon in the autumn long, long ago, told me was 'a world of floating things'.

Our imagination in this confrontation may tempt us into believing that we can improve on this sort of truth, but that would, as the Zen master expressed it, lead to self-illusion and float away and leave only black holes in the day behind.

There is another great difficulty too: we cannot follow the pattern of our own experience of the truth chronologically, since so much of the truth does not belong to the world of the clock and the calendar but, almost immeasurably, is a 'before' and an 'after' and at our own beginning is already part of an infinite compound which, as our own time becomes more specific, makes us feel as if we were looking into another universe within ourselves, spread out there as the night sky packed with stars presents itself in the southern hemisphere to the senses. Even as a boy I would stand looking up at the night knowing that, among all the brightest planets with their moons and satellites and suns greater than ours, my 'tonight' was not the same night up there, and that across the light years in between, where so many stars were hesitating between their night and ours, there were some that had already vanished forever.

Yet there were also stars whose light would burst in on one's senses in a space where no light had been before with such power that astronomers call them supernovae, their brightness already old when it became newly born in my eyes.

Even more sobering, there were stars and other cosmic bodies, invisible to the most powerful electronic telescopes but already known and charted in the Admiralty map of heaven by their influences on the other stars.

It is the nearest kind of metaphor, inadequate as it may be, for what happened in my own imagination and navigated me, as it were, astronomically to Blady. And what appears to be here, now, the beginning, was a moment when I had to turn astronomer and prowl among the known and visible stars and their neighbours, watching their activity and places of congregation where at some inner sanctuary of the universe the mystery of things is being transformed into a kind of living wonder. And so, by following a pattern in and out of time before and

beyond the here and now, one discovers one's own specific sense of meaning which for me would also be lived in and around about Blady.

This, of course, was easier said than done. Some of our easiest platitudes disguise the difficulties of their practice, and certainly one of the hardest to follow is the old English maxim that the longest way round is the shortest way there, particularly in an era which has such passionate faith in the short cut, in the instant happening, and in cutting out all that is imagined to be in the way of instant solutions. There has perhaps never been a moment when the importance of 'being' is so neglected in the general preoccupation with 'doing', and when there is no realisation, at heart, of the unfolding of the human spirit which the truth demands. The truth yields to nothing except growth: it has no method which does not correspond to the 'method of the rose' – which is but to grow.

In the course of time this aspect of the truth grew in importance within my own conscious reckoning. I do not know, even so, if I would have been any good at recognising it had I not learned something about it in my years of imprisonment, including weeks of solitary confinement and days of actual condemnation to death and, ultimately, a narrow escape from starvation. That experience has remained with me in a way which I could never describe accurately but draw upon from time to time as the source of truth and accurate measure of my own and other people's values. It is part, perhaps, of what is most important in human beings and their societies: not their activity, and not ultimately their 'being' alone, but the climate in which both these aspects of living are included. It was this climate which I brought from prison with me, only to go – in a physical state when I could hardly walk, and a drive of just a few miles in a Japanese car made me violently seasick – back into the field for some more war. Yet even there I recognised that the climate had changed and new things were beginning to grow.

And one of these things demanded that when I wrenched myself out of the turmoil in South-East Asia at last, before I could face London again, before I could face my own family

and my mother whom I loved without reserve, I had to absent myself from all other human beings and in secret make my way, accompanied only by two haphazard helpers chosen from a group of unemployed among my black countrymen, far off into the bushveld and camp there on one of my favourite (and then still comparatively secret) rivers, the Pafuri, and live alone with nature and the animals for company.

I knew at the time that I could not explain to anyone why I had done this, because it would be too much for their understanding. One of the lessons I had learned at the school from which I had just come was that one had an obligation not to trouble one's fellow human beings with things that were beyond their understanding. One had to learn to respect the capacities of others, whether greater or lesser than one's own. I remember writing at the time a kind of prayer in which I asked that my own gift of light should not blur a lesser one, nor dim the one that came from this area of the supernovae of meaning of which I have spoken. In all communications one had to look for a readiness and a certain two-way traffic of comprehension. After all, there is enough of meaning in even the meanest forms of human being to occupy a lifetime not without wonder in their exchange with their neighbours. I am not trying to say that there are not moments when one speaks out for a truth, as objectively as one can, which collective awarenesses may not only misunderstand but violently reject. But one can only do so then, I feel, through what has been established as of truly objective importance within oneself in the course of the life one has led.

But when asked one day, when I did let out this secret meeting in the heart of Africa between the nature of Africa and myself, why I did it, the answer which came unprompted out of myself took even me by surprise, and I said: 'I have been a kind of Gulliver, not his author, because I am neither a Swift nor a swallow that can never make a summer,' and we all, I remember, smiled at the involuntary pun, 'but I am a sort of bird of passage and in my passing seem to have been through countries which in the great and terrible Dean's book of imaginary travels are symbolically orchestrated. The all-time bounty-hunter of idiots,

presumptuous and partial men and their creeds, societies and values, in Gulliver he passes through all four seasons of the human spirit. In the first he is a giant among little men, in the second he is a little man in a world of giants, in the third and most portentous he goes into a floating world of islands, and in the fourth he sojourns in exile for the last time in the Kingdom of the Horses. I too had to make a journey to the animal kingdom of Africa and then come back slowly out of the wars and confusions and the unnecessary wounding and rejection of natural life by the world of men, their clashes of culture, their prejudices of mind and spirit and find, as it were, there on the banks of the Pafuri, the resolution which Gulliver found at the end of his journey to the Kingdom in his own stable and in the company there of his own horses. His stable, indeed, was to him an image of return to "the Garden" as referred to by Voltaire with such precision that his words have become proverbial in the mouth of his Candide: "*Cela est bien dit . . . mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.*"

'It was only by living with these horses that Gulliver could persuade himself to venture back into the world of men, first in a state where he could hardly bear the smell of his own wife and family for more than a brief hour or two, and then, by increasing the time from day to day, achieving at last a state in which he could leave the horses and take his place in the world, equipped in mind and spirit to stand firm in what the world of men, and their addiction to the floating world of things, so dangerously called "peace".'

The real significance of this allusion to Swift did not occur to me at the time, although it was clearly an indication that the pattern of Blady was already a profound potential in my unconscious. At the time it just appeared to me the normal kind of association which would occur to any person who loved literature and found himself in my situation.

From this Pafuri moment I ventured out wider into the world of men, and what happened then is, in the sense in which the happenings were of some objective significance, fully described and dealt with in other books I have written. But what does need emphasis here is that — rather like one of the stars which

I have mentioned that exercise a great influence on the movements of their neighbours though they themselves are invisible and will not be visible until the right and the light of meaning have been earned – I was drawn as if by magnet to a life which almost immediately led me to explore immense, uncharted wildernesses in the heart of my native continent, the greatest of which was the Kalahari Desert, and for some years I devoted myself to exploring these ‘known unknowns’. I did all that – in so far as I was conscious of what I was doing – because instinct and opportunity and a love and gift for making do in bush and jungle and desert matched the opportunities put in my way, and seemed to be the most honest and worthwhile kind of employment for a person like me who had to start rediscovering himself and resuming a way of his own.

I was soon to find that, in exploring vast tracts of country where no Europeans had been before, the impact on me went far beyond what my senses conveyed, significant and vivid as their transmission turned out to be. The simple, overwhelming fact was that exploring the physical unknown became, from the beginning, more and more an exploration of an immense unknown in myself, so that although the journeys themselves and what appeared to be of interest to a larger world have been recorded in several books of mine, there were special moments, almost like phases on a kind of pilgrimage of providence, and some of those moments – which illustrate this progression over some six years of my immediate post-war life – stand out now like the lighthouses I have seen in the dark of the many oceans over which I have travelled.

The first of these moments came one day when I was lying in the grass on a mountain top in central Africa with the earth underneath me warm and alive. Through all my body I seemed to feel it like a kind of electric blanket holding me warm and secure as if a gift direct from the caring and loving heart of our great mother, the African earth. Between the tassels of grass high above me the sky, as so often in Africa, was a sort of midnight blue, and a great feeling of exhilaration broke through me and the thought presented itself, bright and quick to my slow tongue, and I could only catch it in retrospect on my return

to Europe in words which found a place in my book *Venture to the Interior*. It was a form of certain faith, of even more than the Pauline conviction so beautifully expressed by perhaps the greatest writer in the Bible. It was for me:

*... the not-yet in the now,  
The taste of fruit that does not yet exist,  
Hanging the blossom on the bough.*

These words expressed a thought that remains constant, and I am amazed how many letters I still get and how often I am asked from which Chinese text that quotation came, or from which poem of Eliot the lines are taken. The answer, of course, is that I merely wrote them down; they came to me out of Africa and the kind of journeying I was doing then.

And its importance has continued to grow and its light in the dark of myself increase because it came out of a bitter experience in prison where, taken out to what we thought could be our own execution, we were made by the Japanese to watch the most brutal execution of others; and, during the watching, an officer, standing between me and a great friend and great prison commander whom we all called Nick, fainted on trembling, thin and weak legs. Nick and I had to support him as he stood there, and in the process we all touched hands and I was startled, because throughout my physical being there was an inrush of what I can only describe as electricity, which was not just a thing of energy but was also charged with a sense of hope, certainty, belonging and life for ever.

I knew then, and the knowledge has grown and not dimmed, that this is what flesh and blood is about and is meant to be, and but for this I do not know how I could have steered my course in the years that have followed even up to today, because the external scene of the post-war human world appears to be stubbornly determined to deny and destroy that one-ness of life we are meant to share.

Perhaps the most important of these moments in the Kalahari came after days of crashing through the bush, and at times forests, between the Zambezi and the Chobe rivers and the great

Makarikari pan, as we hurled our vehicles blindly at an opaque screen of leaf and bush and trees ahead, not knowing what would be on the other side. It was the kind of going that was truly exciting and, just in the going, raised one's spirits into feeling that all was worthwhile. Then suddenly, when I was leading, we broke through the bush and the open Kalahari was before us. We could cease zigzagging, twisting and turning and, to the joy of my black companions who had been lying on their backs with sticks to ward off the mambas that appeared every now and then, birdnesting overhead and, as they believed, lashing out at their faces, we could steer a straight compass course south. Towards evening we went slowly up the sides of a curved dune. There were moments when the sand was so deep that our overheated trucks faltered, yet we were up and almost immediately sliding down the far side when we saw before us a wide pan, bare and firm at the bottom with lines of sedges around the edges and in the far distance a clump, a sort of grove of camelthorns and bushes but, in between, full of animals of all kinds which were no longer grazing but standing still, looking in the direction of this profound rumble that had disturbed them.

There were groups of superb springbok, the most graceful gazelle in existence and the favourite decoration of the long avenues of the blue distances, gemsbok, gnu, hartebeest and eland; and as we went deeper into the pan towards them they seemed totally unafraid, only full of natural curiosity, making way for us politely and gracefully as the animals of nature do when not threatened, committed to make room for one another. And then as the reverberations of our vehicles, moving as slowly and as quietly as possible, reached down into the earth below, jackals came out of their holes, bat-eared foxes appeared and some meerkats popped up, and all joined the watchers.

I cannot put into adequate words what such an intimate glimpse into this undiscovered world of nature did to us except, somewhere, it evoked the 'Garden at the beginning', a world of innocence before man was so successfully seduced by the serpent. It was, as it seemed to me then, not only proof but bedrock

of this 'not-yet in the now' feeling I had brought with me to the scene.

All this was confirmed that night when, around our camp, there was a disturbance among the animals on the far edges of the pan and, in the stillness of the night, the sound of hooves pounding the earth like drums. I came out of my mosquito net at once, and then, almost as soon as it started, the pounding ceased and the noise reduced itself to a steady advance of animal feet towards us, until by torchlight we saw that the animals had arranged themselves in close order all around our camp as if nearness to us gave them safety, or at least a sense of increased security. We knew then that the carnivorous creatures of the Kalahari, who are many, some great and formidable, must inevitably, in the interests of the law of proportion, be prowling to invade and feed for survival in this privileged reserve of antelopes and gazelle.

We gave all our camping places a name. This camp we called 'Paradise Pan'. Even friends who have never been to Africa have, by proxy, found this moment precious, and it can therefore be imagined how singularly bright it shone in my own war-darkened mind.

There were many moments too that all became in the sum one moment. Those years on the whole were good years for rain. Kalahari rain tends to be thunderstorm rain except in the north and the northwest, where an intrusion of northern climate brings more consistent and frequent rain. But out there where I was, released from bush and brush, mopani and other forest, between the Nata, the Zambezi and the Chobe rivers, the great Makarikari was gleaming with water and burned night and day with flamingo fire, and even the dust where the birds took wing was quickened into a glow of flame sunk back into its coals.

Sometimes it was so hot that, in spite of the lightning flashing and the rumbling, I would look up at the dark cloud above and could see a release of heavy rain coming down through the air and rapidly diminishing until it was almost impossible to see as cohesive drops, briefly became faintly misty and then was dissolved into transparent vapour. But when after many days the cloud subdued the heat at last and the rains came down, the



transformation was magical, because the sands of the Kalahari are fertile. They are part of the profound longing of the great African mother earth to produce and to nourish and to support an immense family of natural life no matter of what diversity and numbers. Plants, birds, animals, insects and reptiles, all were dear to her heart, and I suspect she had no favourites among them. The response, therefore, to what was the equivalent in nature of a deed and act of consummation of male and female was for me miraculous. Everything, from the flowers to the sudden leaf on skeleton-white thorn, the birds singing and building nests, and every living and growing thing filled with excitement of re-creation, was so vivid and unmistakable that a similar process was released in myself. I had no doubt that, in a sense, everything I saw was a natural priest and acolyte, and I had what, in this age of reason and from a great height of contemporary intellect, is referred to as some sort of 'religious experience'. My own reaction was so intense that I thought there could perhaps be no greater task for man than to recognise this vast Cinderella nature of the desert and from somewhere produce constant attention of water and make it alive and full of flower as the rain around me had done.

Even the great Dean to whom I have referred said that 'whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together'.

As so often, this thought of an aspect of the wasteland experience which touches on a reality beyond human day and greater than anything in life, produced an occasion in which the mystery of it all seemed to become substantial.

I would set out in the morning at dawn after having called all my camp to life with a cup of coffee and, with my gun on my shoulder, walk out in the direction of a visible mark I had pointed out to my company and would experience the desert alone until the noise of trucks became distinct and loud behind me, and then I would mount a termite hill or any other mound available and look back in the direction of my little convoy. And how little it would look, with that sea of land and ocean of sky