

Lanford Wilson's New Play *Rain Dance*

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Stories • Poems • Reviews

## On the Banks of the Save

by Donna Baier Stein

All of her family were gone. Their six cows were gone. Their mud-brick house, the tin roof, the dhow, her brother's animal horn *lupembe*. Her father Massao, gone. Her mother Lina, gone. Her sister, her brother-in-law, their child. Her brother, who blew music and magic at night from his horn.

And Joaquim. Joaquim whom she has loved like a kudu loves the savanna. Joaquim, her sun in the sky. His gentle eyes, the high bones of his cheeks, his skin brown and shimmery smooth.

Soltana placed her hand flat on the mound of her belly. Waiting inside was their child. With Joao, new life would come from the waterworld inside her into the waterworld that Mozambique had become.

She shifted her position in the tree, rubbed her back now instead of her arm against the rough bark, still trying to hold herself awake. She moved up and down slowly, feeling the scales of the trunk scratch up and down her vertebrae like a strong hand.

Alberto Marcoa pushed the cyclic pitch stick with his right hand, to move the helicopter north towards Chidotane and the banks of the Save. He was glad to have had an extra hour that morning before they took off, while Jacques Hugo lubricated the hinges. Not long, but still long enough for Alberto to get his breathing back to normal for a bit. He'd walked over to the game reserve at the base. There were rhinos and cheetahs and bucks; the cheetahs were there to keep the bucks off the runway. That morning, he'd seen a buck on the road, walked right up to him and let the dumb animal sniff his hand. Dumb because the buck didn't know how lucky he was to be where he was and not where the floods were taking their worst toll.

Alberto was glad he'd been able to sleep last night, too, even if he had dreamt. His dreams had been haunted by those things he'd seen: the bloated bodies and collapsed huts, the flooded

fields. He and Jacques Hugo and Masamba had flown all day yesterday trying to airlift people who'd been stranded on a narrow strip of land that was all that remained of Pegoes. The helicopter had been packed then; below him he'd seen women cooking the last of their food, stirring huge pots of cornmeal porridge.

That morning, the major had said, "You have to save people before you can feed them. You can't feed dead people."

Alberto started to argue back. "But what do we do first? They need food, they need us to bring them something that sustains them."

The major didn't answer because there was no answer. Time was short. You could do one thing or another, and one thing would go undone. Alberto didn't like the feeling.

On Pegoes, Alberto flew the Oryx helicopter in as low as he was able. When he gave a signal, Masamba threw over a black rope ladder that twisted in the high wind. A few of the refugees were able to climb up by themselves. When Masamba shone a search light into a wooded area nearby, they saw a man lying on the ground, his leg bent in a hard V beneath him. Jacques Hugo raised his chin to say he'd go down, and he let Masamba hook a cable and pulley to the back of his uniform.

Alberto looked back at the three people shivering in the back of the copter.

"Too heavy," he mouthed to Jacques, meaning not the ones they'd already rescued but the man down below. He wasn't sure Jacques could lift him without a basket, but his words were lost in the wind and blades.

Alberto felt a drop of sweat slide from his forehead into his eye. He blinked quickly to clear it then sat nearly motionless at the controls while Jacques Hugo lifted the man aboard.

He was good at keeping the copter hovering in mid-air. He could sense every movement of the craft, every subtle and not so subtle buffeting it took from the wind and the rain, as though it were his own body. Later that afternoon, he expertly dropped the copter right down into the mud while a whole desperate family scrambled aboard.

Soltana had been with her family when the waters first began to rise during the night. They had climbed up onto the roof, her brother and sister and Soltana carrying their sick father. Her shoulders and back ached as they lifted him from his bed, heaved him. Soltana clung to the roof, and a jagged piece of tin cut her palm. Trickle of blood ran down her mother's hands as well, like the miraculous gashes a shaman had once left on the inside of a woman's arm, simply by pointing his finger.

Soltana's mother held her father's head in her lap. His face was fevered and dark with shadows, his eyelids closed and beaded with sweat.

Sister had brought food up in her skirt: millet she'd cooked on the last open fire the night before, *massa*, some canned sardines.

"There's not enough," Soltana whispered in Sister's ear. "Not for all of us."

"*Não.*" Sister touched the underchin of <sup>her own</sup> the baby in her arms. "We will share."

"What will we use to eat? We have no bowls, no spoons." Soltana looked down at the rising waters below them then at Sister's face. "We will pretend it's a picnic," she said. "We will eat with our hands and pretend we are at Lake Malawi. Like we did when we were girls."

Sister smiled and squeezed Soltana's hand.

"We will pretend we are sitting on the beach, and my head is in your lap, and you are holding something above my mouth, something I want very much to eat. The fruit of the sausage tree perhaps."

They laughed, then quickly stopped laughing. They stayed awake all night, frightened by the water and the high winds. They knew it was morning when the sky turned from black to gray and a pale yellow circle climbed slowly above the tree tops, hidden behind clouds.

At the Air Force base in Beira, the sky was still overcast. Pilots shook their heads and muttered. There were only seven

copters, fifteen pilots. All of them working overtime to fly the daily rescue missions.

"I don't want to fly today," Alberto said to Jacques Hugo when he came back from seeing the buck.

Jacques was bent over a huge wrinkled map spread on the runway.

"Here," Jacques said, pointing with his finger. "And here." Alberto's stomach rolled.

"I don't want to go," he said again. "It's too dark. I'm too tired."

Jacques shook his head.

Soltana wanted to sleep, or die. But if she slept, she would dream. And her thin arms, spotted with sores, would loosen their grip on the tree. She and <sup>her unborn child</sup> Joao would both fall into the muddy, swirling waters below. Waters that were already filled with refuse: tree trunks less stable than her own washed downstream by winds and rain, lemurs and makeshift wooden coffins, face-down bodies of the dead.

She rubbed the inside of her arm against the trunk of the tree, up and down, slowly and hard, until bits of skin were pulled back.

Her arms were sore, her legs cramped from sitting in the hard crook of the biggest branch. She shifted her weight to her other thin buttock, tried to stretch one leg without losing her balance.

She'd never imagined the sky held so much water! It ran in clear rills down her baby-extended belly, slicked the bark of the tall baobab tree to which she clung, hooded her ears with a constant rhythm that was non-rhythm, sound that was non-sound.

She'd eaten grasshoppers and leaves to survive. Opened her mouth to let rain-swollen clouds quench her thirst. Done things she should never have done and failed to do things she should have.

Again, Soltana touched her belly then raised a fist to the sky. Inside her, Joao rested in mother-water. Last year, she had

watched Dr. Mapengo cut open Sister's belly with a knife and lift out a baby.

Pain clenched a strong fist inside Soltana's belly; her eyes closed. She could feel the wetness of the rain on her eyelids, the gentle beat of it on her eyeballs. *Wake*, she thought the rain was saying, but she didn't know who or what the rain was or what it wanted her to do. So she opened her eyes, searched the sky. The sky had been cut open, too; the rain poured. The drops fell right on her eyes.

When a second pain came, she couldn't tell if it was Joao, impatient inside her belly, or simple grief that grabbed her insides and would not let go.

Alberto didn't feel like a hero. He was well-trained, and he was doing what the Air Force told him to do. But he didn't think that made him much of a hero. He was prepared, or so he had thought. He had been able to save many people, but there were others he hadn't been able to save. And that was what made him so tired.

"Come on, man," Jacques said to him, rising to his feet and looking into Alberto's eyes. "It's time to go."

Alberto looked away from him, toward the wildlife refuge.

"It's that boy's aunt, isn't it?" Jacques asked.

Alberto said nothing.

"You pulled on my rope," Jacques said. "So I knew something was wrong, that there wasn't time to get her."

The words hit Alberto like knives.

"You had to." Jacques grabbed Alberto's shoulder. "You had no choice. You know the copter better than anyone."

"I had a choice."

"What kind of a choice is that? If the copter crashed, everyone on it would have died. I would have died. You would have died."

Alberto shrugged.

Yesterday in Pegoes they had seen houses and crops and seeds and thin mattresses and goats carried away by the waters. A group of people standing on the roof of their car, and a current so

strong it swept the 4 x 4 away like a dead leaf. Before he had even spotted the boy and his aunt through the trees, Alberto had watched a jail crumble and the flood waters rise to the whitewashed ceilings of its open cells.

Soltana's family had stayed on the roof of their mud-flat house for days, looking out across a lake of water where their cows and corn and livelihood once stood. Looking for some sign of Joaquim returning from the fields. The fifth time the sun came up over the trees, she knew she had lost ~~him~~ <sup>her husband</sup>.

They were all very tired and very weak. The food had run out. The nipple on Sister's breast was wrinkled and small, and ~~the~~ <sup>her</sup> Sister's baby cried almost constantly.

On the night of the sixth day, the winds blew very fast. Sister slid part way down the roof, the baby asleep in her arm. Soltana started to bend to reach for her but her own big belly stopped her. By the time she repositioned her feet so Joao would be safe, <sup>inside her</sup> Sister had fallen into the water, almost soundlessly. She hit her head on a tree trunk, disappeared under the water. Soltana reached down, jerking, but when her hand came back it was empty.

The next morning, the winds had slowed. Soltana's mother told her to try to swim.

Go, her eyes said as her gnarled fingers curled in Soltana's father's coarse black hair. And Soltana put her hand on Joao in her belly and slid <sup>then both</sup> into the water. It was a struggle to stay afloat, the current was so strong, but she pushed through.

Later the wind picked up again. When she looked back, she saw only a dark outline where the mud-flat house used to be.

~~And~~ After a while, she found this tree.

Alberto felt he was cursed. He was no savior. He had left that boy's aunt, and he knew she would have died by now. He wanted to turn around and fly back to the base at Beira. He would tell the major he would only deliver food, boxes of high-protein biscuits, anything other than claim falsely that he was a person who could save anyone.

He looked at Jacques Hugo sitting next to him. In the copter, it was hard to speak because the noise of the rotor blades drowned out all other noises.

He watched Jacques adjust his headphones. Both of them had fought in the civil war. Jacques was a white man; he had been in the force that raided Mozambique during the time of apartheid. Alberto had been a guerilla. Now they were comrades. His partner's face was drawn; Alberto knew he had seen too much these last days.

Visibility in front of the copter was low. The rain sheeted down the window and past the side openings. Alberto couldn't see, he couldn't hear, but his right hand stayed firm on the pitch stick and his feet stuck to the rudder pedals as though they'd been glued there. Pushing the right one, the pitch lowered, thrust was reduced, and the nose of the copter turned right. Always heading north. Following the navigational map and some instinct not his own.

Last night at the base, Alberto had spoken to the boy.

"I was visiting my aunt," <sup>the boy</sup> he said. "At night I heard people shouting water, water, so I ran away." The boy's shirt was riddled with holes, and a skin infection was spreading up to his neck and face.

"When the waters came we were sleeping," he repeated. "People started crying, and there wasn't time to take anything, just to run."

When the helicopter had arrived, the water was already up to the boy's waist. The wind was strong. When the craft started moving forward, the tip speed on the blades started to change, and Alberto was afraid they'd roll over. Jacques had pulled the boy up but when it was time to go back down for the aunt, Alberto wouldn't let him.

"We've got to head back," Alberto shouted over toward Jacques sitting next to him. They'd been flying for hours, finding no one alive, nothing to save. The sky was too dark to fly safely.

Now it was Jacques' turn to shake his head no.

The clouds shifted and for a fraction of a second, such a short time it seemed to Alberto impossible to even count as time,



he could see the River Save below him. A few tall trees, yellowwood and sausage, and mosses and ferns. He knew the surrounding land by heart. He knew it was riddled with landmines. Once, Alberto had seen a man stand on a road and pee into the verge, exploding one of the mines buried throughout his country.

Suddenly he tilted the helicopter forward, decreased the thrust. Jacques Hugo stared straight ahead but nodded as if in answer to Alberto's unspoken question. On a patch on Jacques' jacket there was a picture of Elvis Presley. Beneath the crooning, sad-looking face were the words, "If he's out there, we'll find him."

Soltana still didn't know what strength had enabled her to climb the tree. Some instinct bred into her as a baby in her own mother's arms, reaching for the small breasts that gave no milk and almost, but not quite, blocked out the big round yellow-white sun that shone beyond the mother.

Now, doubled over with yet another sharp pain that split her insides, she couldn't think of any reason to survive. She couldn't think of any reason why she'd been left, alone of all her family, caught between heaven and earth in this odd-shaped tree. She felt hollow in her gut, as though someone had taken a hand and scooped out everything that was in her. When the rain touched her skin, the drops felt like knives. When the wind touched her body, its caress seemed cold and fatal, as though it could sweep through her.

When she thought of Sister and her own empty, outstretched hand, she knew why she felt this way, why she thought she didn't deserve to survive. She'd done nothing to help, focused only on her own survival and the child she thought grew inside her. Perhaps there was no child. Or if there was perhaps he would be no more than another lump of clay, less beautiful than his father. That is what would hurt most of all, she thought.

If what was inside her came out into the world, Joao would one day grow into a man with gentle eyes and high cheekbones and brown skin. His skin would shimmer in the sun if the sun ever shone again. All day long, his skin would be open to the air, and he would grow tall breathing in through all the pores of his body. And he would care for other people.

He would slog through thigh-deep mud and mangrove swamps, carve ornaments from malachite and soapstone, fish for *kampango* in the lake, draw buckets of water from the well.

And everything he would do, Soltana would see Joaquim, his father, doing behind him: mirroring, teaching, teaching, mirroring. So for her, Joaquim's life and death would happen many times over again each day.

And then she thought: *I can let go, I can let go of this tree and slide into the water. No one is making me go on.*

She loosened her grip on the branch, flexed her fingers slowly – one at a time, then two, three – to see what it would feel like to actually let go. She remembered Sister's face when she had slid off the tin roof. It held no fear. No surprise.

Another pain grabbed her, annoying. She wanted to be done with them. She hadn't been able to control them for a very long time and thought she might never. There was no answer to this.

But there was another feeling inside her now, a funny feeling like an urge that came from a place she'd never felt before.

When she looked down, there was water trickling down her leg, mixing with the water that poured so steadily from the sky.

To her own surprise, Soltana felt her body push. She closed her eyes then opened them, and so quickly she barely knew what came before and what came after, Joao was partly born. There in the crook of the widest branch of the gnarly old baobab tree, between her slick opened legs, she saw his black-napped head. It was already completely outside of her. Something separate and at the same time, a part of.

She knew then that this was part of the miracle, that her body could open so wide, so willingly to allow this. There was a little twist, both inside and out of her, and one dark shoulder popped out and then another, smooth and shimmering, and she watched in awe as the rest of Joao slid easily from her. The head seemed to have just dropped out by itself. But at the shoulders, Joao was definitely participating – wiggling one shoulder forward, pulling the other one back, not forcefully but peacefully, as though he were navigating his way into the world, nosing in expertly to say, *I am here. Here I AM.* The little dark body was covered with mucus and

blood and all the rest, all of it washing away under the rain, and he came out like fruit pushing through custard. Soltana bent forward easily, catching sight of the long scratches on her arm, the blood running in rivulets again, everything fluid and in motion.

She caught him, kept him from falling into the dark wet dangerous branches below her while above her she heard something new, a noise behind the rain.

The helicopter hovered in mid-air above the sprawling branches of the baobab tree. Alberto's father had told him the story about how God, angry with the baobab, had pulled it out and flung it back into the ground headfirst. God would be angry at Alberto, too, for leaving that boy's aunt behind. This baobab was old and big. The interior had died off years ago, leaving a hollow shell. Alberto remembered a major stationed in Namibia who'd installed a flush toilet in one.

It looked like this one might have something inside it, too. Jacques Hugo was practically falling out his side of the copter; Alberto reached his hand over to grab the back of Jacques' jacket.

"Goddammit. Take a look at this," Jacques shouted.

When the man in the leather jacket hovered in the sky before her, she lifted Joao in her arms to show him. The man's mouth moved, shouting words Soltana couldn't hear because of the rain and the other noise behind it. The man pointed up, through the thinning upper branches of the baobab, toward the thing that hovered above them and toward the awful sky with its surprising abundance of water.

Soltana felt very afraid. Afraid that if the man took her up with him as he seemed to want to, the branches of the tree would try to hold her, keep her rooted here on earth. She closed her eyes again, and for a moment didn't know if she died or lived, and if she dreamt, if the dream was of death or if life was the dream.

She felt herself raised by unseen hands.