

DORIS LESSING

The Sun Between Their Feet

The road from the back of the station went to the Roman Catholic Mission, which was a dead-end, being in the middle of a Native Reserve. It was a poor mission, with only one lorry, so the road was always deserted, a track of sand between long or short grasses. The station itself was busy with trains and people, and the good country in front was settled thick with white farmers, but all the country behind the station was unused because it was granite boulders, outcrops and sand. The scrub cattle from the Reserve strayed there. There were no human beings. From the track it seemed the hills of boulders were so steep and laced with vines and weed there would be no place to go between them. But you could force your way in, and there it became clear that at least in the past people had made use of this wilderness. For one thing there were the remains of earth and rock defences the Mashona had made against the Matabele when they came raiding after cattle and women before Rhodes put an end to all that. For another, the under-surfaces of the great boulders were covered with Bushmen paintings. After a hundred yards or so of clambering and squeezing there came a flattish sandy stretch before the boulders erupted again. In this space, at the time of the raiding, the women and the cattle would have been kept while the men held the surrounding defences. From this space, at the time of the Bushmen, small hunting men took coloured clays and earths and plants for their pictures.

It had rained last night and the low grass was still wet around my ankles and the early sun had not dried the sand. There was a sharp upjut of rock in the middle of the space. The rock was damp, but I could feel the wet heat being dragged up past my bare legs.

Sitting low here, the encircling piles of boulders seemed high as mountains, blocking the horizons. The rocks were dark grey, but red and purple and yellow where the lichens stained them. The trees growing through the boulders were meagre, and several were lightning-struck, black skeletons. This was hungry country, growing sand and thin grass and rocks and heat. The sun came down hard between the heat-feeding rocks. After an hour of sun the sand between the grasses showed a clean dry glistening surface and then a dark wet underneath.

The Reserve cattle must have moved here since the rains last

night, for there were a score of fresh cow-pats laid on the grass. Big blue flies buzzed and swore and tumbled over them, breaking the crust the sun had already baked. The air was heavy and sweet.

The buzzing of the flies, the tiny sucking sound of the heat, the steady cooing of the pigeons, made a morning silence.

Hot and silent and save for the flies no movement anywhere, since the winds blew outside this boulder-sheltered space.

But soon there was new movement. Where the flies had broken the crust of the nearest dung-clot, two beetles were already at work. > They were small, dusty, black, round-bodied insects. One had set his back legs over a bit of dung and was heaving and levering at it. The other, with a fast rolling movement, the movement a hen makes settling roused feathers over eggs, was using his body to form the ball before it was heaved clear of the main lump of matter. As soon as the piece was free, both beetles assaulted it with legs and bodies, modelling fast, frantic with creation, seizing it between their back legs, spinning it between their front legs, rolling it under them, both tugging and pushing it through the thick encumbering stems of the grasses that rose over them like forest trees, until at last the ball rolled away from both of them into a plain or glade or inch-wide space of sand. The two beetles scuttled about in the stems a moment, looking for their property. They were on the point of returning to the mother-pile of muck, to start again, when one of them saw the ball lying free in the open, and both ran after it. They were taking it to some place they had chosen for the eggs to hatch.

All over the grassy space, around the cow-pats, dung-beetles were at work, the blue blow-flies hustled and buzzed, and by night all the new cow-stomach-worked grass would be lifted away, rolled away, to feed flies, beetles and new earth. That is, unless it rained hard again, when beetles, flies and dung would be beaten and scattered

by rods of rain.

But there was no sign of rain yet. The sky was the clear blue of African mornings after night-storms.

My two beetles had the sky on their side. They had all day. Somewhere in the grassy hollow was where they had chosen their incubating dung-ball to lie, and they were rolling it towards this spot. They were now rolling it fast towards the rock on which I sat. In a few minutes of work they had reached it, and had hurled themselves and the dungball at its foot. Their momentum took them a few inches up the slope, then they slipped, and ball and beetles rolled back to the flat again.

I got down off the rock and sat in the grass behind them to view the ascent through their eyes.

The rock was about four feet long and three feet high. It was a jutting slab of granite, weeded and lichened, its edges all rounded

by rain and by wind. The beetles, hugging their ball between their legs and bellies looked up to a savage mountain, whose first slopes were an easy foot-assisting invitation. They rolled their ball, which was now crusted with dirt, to a small ridge under the foothills, and began, this time with slow care, to hitch it up from ridge to ridge, from one crust of lichen to the next. One beetle above, one below, they cherished their ball upwards. Soon they met the obstruction that had defeated them before: a sudden upswelling in the mountain wall. This time, one remained below the ball, holding its weight with its back legs, while the other scouted off sideways to find an easier path. It returned, gripped the ball with its legs, and the two beetles resumed their difficult, sideways scrambling progress, up around the swell in the rock into a small valley which led, or so it seemed, into the second great ascent. But this valley was a snare, for there was a crevasse across it. The mountain was riven here. Heat and cold had split it down almost to its base, and the narrow crack or ravine sloped to a mountain lake full of warm fresh water over a bed of wind-gathered leaves and grass. The dung-ball slipped over the edge of the crevasse into the gulf and rolled gently into the lake where it was supported at its edge by a small fringe of lichen. The beetles flung themselves after it. One, straddling desperate legs from a raft of reed to the shore, held the ball from plunging into the depths of the lake. The other, gripping fast with its front legs to a thick bed of weed on shore, grappled the ball with its back legs and together they heaved and shoved that precious dung out of the water and back into the ravine. But now the mountain walls rose high on either side, and the ball lay between them. The beetles remained still a moment. The dirt had been washed from the dung, and it was now wet and shining and very slippery.

They consulted. Again one remained on guard while the other scouted, returning to report that if they rolled the ball clear along the bottom of the ravine, this would in due course narrow, and they could, by use of legs and shoulders and backs, lift the ball up the crack to a new height on the mountain and, by crossing another dangerous shoulder, attain a gentle weed-roughed slope that led to the summit. This they tried. But on the dangerous shoulder there was a disaster. The lake-slippery ball left their grasp and plunged down the mountain side to the ground, to the point they had started from half an hour before. The two beetles flung themselves down after it, and again they began their slow, difficult climb. Again their dung-ball fell into the crevasse, rolled down into the lake; again they rescued it, at the cost of infinite resource and patience, again they pushed and pulled it up the ravine, again they manoeuvred it up the crack, again they tried to roll the thing around the mountain's sharp shoulder, and again it fell back to the foot of the moun-

tain, they plunging after it.

I continued to sit in the low hot grass, feeling the hot sun first on my back, then hard down on my shoulders, and then direct from above on my head. The air was dry now, all the moisture from the night had gone up into the air; clouds were packing along the lower skies. Even the small pool in the rock was evaporating. Above it the air quivered with steam. When, for the third time, the beetles lost their ball into the mountain lake, it was no lake, but a spongy marsh, and getting it out involved no danger or difficulty. Now the ball was sticky, losing shape, and crusted with bits of leaf and grass.

At the fourth attempt, when the ball rolled down to the starting point, and the beetles rolled down after it, it was past midday, my head ached with heat, and I took a large stiff leaf, slipped it under the ball of dung and the beetles, and lifted this unit away to one side, away from the impossible mountain, so the beetles had clear ground between themselves and wherever they wanted to go.

But when I removed the leaf from under them, they rested a moment in the new patch of territory, scouted this way and that under thick high grass, found their position, and at once rolled their ball back to the foot of the mountain where they prepared another ascent.

Meanwhile, the cow-pats on the grass had been dismantled by the flies and the other dung-beetles. Nothing remained but small grassy fragments, or a dusty brown stain on the lifting grasses. The buzzing of the flies was silenced. The pigeons were stilled by the heat. Far away the thunder rolled, and sometimes there was the shriek of a train at the station or the puffing and clanging of shunting engines.

The beetles again got the ball up into the ravine, and this time it rolled down, not into a marsh, but into a damp bed of leaves. There they rested awhile in a steam of heat.

Sacred beetles, these: the sacred beetles of the Egyptians, scarabs, holding the symbol of the sun between their busy stupid feet. Pompous, busy, silly beetles, mothering their ball of dung again and again up a mountain when a few minutes march to one side would take them clear of it. The book says dung-beetles form a ball of dung, lay their eggs in it, search for a gentle slope, roll it up and let it roll down again so that in the process of rolling it acquires a sheltering coat of dust or sand. The slope is chosen, says the book, by a beautiful instinct, so that the ball of dung finally comes to rest in a spot suitable for the hatching of the new generation of sacred insect.

Again I lifted them, dung and beetles, away from the precipice to a clear place where they had the choice of a dozen suitable gentle slopes, but again they rolled their ball back to the mountain foot.

The sun now had rolled over the midday position and was shining

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on to my face. Sweat was scattering off me. The air snapped with heat. The sky over where the sun would go down was banked high with darkening cloud. Those beetles would have to hurry not to get drowned.

They continued to roll the dung up the mountain, rescue it from the dried bed of the mountain lake, force it up to the exposed dry shoulder, where it rolled down and they plunged after it. Again and again and again and again. The afternoon passed. The sun was low in my eyes. I could scarcely see the beetles or the dung because of the glare from a black pack of clouds which were red-rimmed from the lowering sun behind. The red streaming rays came down, and the black beetles and their dung ball on the mountain side seemed dissolved in the red and sizzling light.

It was raining away on the far hills. The drumming of the rain and the drumming of the thunder came closer. I could see the skirmishing side-lances of an army of rain pass half a mile away beyond the rocks. A few great shining drops fell here, hissed out on burning sand and on the burning mountain side. The beetles laboured on.

The sun dropped behind the piled boulders and now this glade rested in a cool spent light, the black trees and black boulders standing around it, waiting for the rain and for the night. The beetles were again on the dangerous slope. They had the ball tight between their legs, they clung on to the lichens, they clung to rock-wall and their treasure with the desperation of stupidity.

Now the hard red glare was gone it was possible to see them and the ball clearly. The ball was no longer the perfect shining globe it had been. It was uneven and dry, a loose bundle of fragmented grass. The beetles clutched it tight and laboured it around the exposed mountain shoulder. There was a clang of thunder. The grasses hissed and swung as a bolt of wind came down fast from the sky. The wind hit the ball of dung, it fell apart into a small puff of dusty grass, and the beetles ran scurrying over the surface of the rock looking for it.

Now the rain came marching towards us, it reached the boulders in a grey envelopment of wet. The big shining drops, outrunners of the rain-army, reached the beetles' mountain and-one, two! The drops hit the beetles smack, off the rock into the already seething-wet grasses at its foot.

I ran out of the glade with the rain sniping at my heels and shoulders, thinking of the beetles lying under the precipice, up which, tomorrow, after the rain had stopped and the cattle had come grazing and the sun come out, they would again labour and heave a fresh ball of dung.