



African Visas

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Maria Thomas was the pen name of Roberta Worrick who came by her knowledge of the Dark Continent through painful personal experience, beginning with a stint as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia in 1971, a fateful year that marked the beginning of apocalyptic horrors, including drought, famine, and the violent overthrow of the monarchy. The word “visa” in the title of this collection of seven pieces (one longish story or novella and six short stories), suggests that the reader will be given access or privileged entrance into a world virtually unknown to Americans, with the exception of Peace Corps volunteers and career diplomats.

Maria Thomas relied heavily on her knowledge of Ethiopia and East Africa generally in composing these tales, especially the longest piece, “The Jiru Road,” which follows the career of Peace Corps volunteer Sarah Easterday. This brave woman manages to build a road up the impossibly steep side of a mountain to the wretchedly poor village of Jiru, where, like the natives, she lives on a dirt-floored hut and survives on a meager diet of rice and goat’s milk. In the process of building the road, she watches her only American neighbor die of rabies while her only other American friend becomes an alcoholic. In the end, she is forced to leave Ethiopia, but she has undergone a profound metamorphosis. She is no longer just a skinny American volunteer but a profoundly committed and generous human being.

To some extent, all the characters in these stories experience a major transformation in their lives because of their contact with Africa. In “The Visit,” Mrs. Dubois, a black American, visits her daughter in Lagos, Nigeria and learns to treasure a place that initially she loathes. Mrs. Frances Eliot, in “Back Bay to the Bundu,” abandons her pampered life in New England to settle on a dusty cattle ranch in Kenya. Other transformations dredge up darker truths, as in “Makonde Carvers” and “Ethiopia,” where the American heroines discover that the African artists can also be mere con-artists, preying on the expectations of Europeans and Americans. Permanent losses also occur. The son of a missionary couple, in “The Blonde Masai,” and the wife of a music professor, in “My Mermaid,” both run away with Africans, leaving their families utterly perplexed. No character in AFRICAN VISAS escapes the dark power of Africa—nor did the author herself. Maria Thomas died in Ethiopia in a plane crash in the summer of 1989, a tragic finale to a brilliant and admirable career.

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