Editor’s note: A few years ago Weiss suggested that we write a surrealistic comedy about Nigeria. We got so far as to exchange a series of long letters, ‘pouring out the ideas, the themes, the raw substance’. For a variety of reasons we didn’t get any further. At the time Weiss was working on another book High Risk/High Gain which was published earlier this year. He also decided to expand the scope of the Nigerian book into something which would encompass the life and death of the country that we knew. This did not lend itself to collaboration. This book is what he is working on now.

But I felt that the Weiss letters - because of their undistilled nature, because of the unique way they evoke Nigeria and much more, because of the way they cut through to writing itself, - should have an independent existence. Ibadan Sketches is an abridged version of those letters. For continuity I have eliminated most of the references to my letters; out of space considerations I had to leave out other sections (which hurt). But what is here is unmitigated Weiss. And it is a very great pleasure.

Gruberg! you son of a bitch, good stuff! And I think compatible. Now I have to get off my ass, which is awfully hard doing I’m so screwed up about this other book. I’ve got snips and snabs, in fact nothing really, no hard backbreaking writing. Description of Ibadan is tough. I don’t know how we’ll catch it, but the book’s got to catch it, repeatedly, always sliced a little differently, like a drumbeat through the book. You’ve got nice little touches, Jesus. But be wary of fake emotion. ‘That’s Ibadan out there goddammit. It’s all mine.’ Is that what you felt, that you could put your arms around the city—that it was really yours? If so, great, let it stand. If not, excise, because a lying emotion will stick out like a sore thumb as the book goes on. You want to lay things down the way they really were. The sound of a baseball thwacking into the mitt—solid! But we don’t know what’s under the surface. We don’t know what we feel about Ibadan until we begin searching, exploring. Ibadan is a tough description. I stood many a time on that supreme fold of hill at Mapo and looked down on the city falling away on both sides, except a crowd always gathered. Was I sick? lost? Nigerians had two faces, one for the white man, one turned inward for other Yorubas to see. It was like they had two names, and they gave us the fake one. All stewards were named Peter or Sunday or Johnson, and never Tunde or Ade or Sola. Here’s a goddamned epiphany for you: steward Samuel was cooking ground nut stew and I tasted the stuff, and it lacked something, a weed or something, and I said to Samuel, you try it, and handed over the spoon,
and he looked uncomfortable, in fact he was stunned, flabbergasted, and shied off, running out to his quarters for his own spoon, because he couldn’t believe in his bedraggled colonial mentality way that master wanted him to taste from the same spoon, the spoon master had touched his superior tongue to, a spoon that afterward would be back into the stew. It was so awfully hard to treat a man with that screwed up mentality like you would any other human being. Can you imagine what would have happened if any of these English ladies had ever found out that their hired help were using master’s toilets, actually placing their filthy black buttocks on their clean toilet seat. They would have been sick throwing up with contamination. Where does this screwed up feeling come from? Okay, great, really getting the fingernail under things, saying non-fatuous things about Africa. Nothing should be in the book unless it quivers. It may quiver for you, and no one else, but at least for you.

Palm wine bars! flies floating tepidly in a swirl in thin semen. The closing of the gates on the Oyo Road, while the train had just left from Maiduguri, and the long wait until the huzzanga rose to such a pitch that the gating man came running out to fling them open again, and then the train came roaring around a curve, and hurriedly ran out to close them again, and the train stopped, like a pawing bull, and maybe backed off—you could be there for hours. But the tradeswomen ran out with the great loaves of bread balanced on their trays and hands stuck out through the slats of the lorry buying, and the great moment was when the lorry was taking off again and not all the money had been transferred—always the voluptuous way the men hopped out of the transports and took a long yawning piss, the more educated crouching down with their knees for shield. The bull run amuck which is a story unto itself, a poor Hausaman in a red agbada squatting over a ditch and getting upended, diving into the ditch, by the rampaging beast—can you imagine the hysteria as it charged through a gas station, the attendant dropping the hose and running for dear life? I had my wheels balanced in Nigeria, which is equivalent to having your palm told, and has just as much scientific validity. They had this elaborate equipment from England that they set up backwards. For major repairs there was this incredible hideaway, a compound deep in off Oyo Road, where everything went on, paint-spraying, blacksmithery, they used to ask me if I had a jack, and after we went to all the trouble of getting it out and setting it up, they’d call ten raggedly kids over and we’d heave the car over on its side and prop it up with stones.

Remember the little girl, Sokharee, Robin Horton’s wife’s sister, the wife a two hundred fifty pound dogfaced bruise, while the child, half bush and half wild, like a flower, dressed in brilliant rags, I don’t mean rags—end pieces of cloth with a hole for her neck—the most unbelievable rich glowing brown,
brown arms and legs, I've ever seen. She was learning English, see, in bits and snatches, 'Put de apple in your mouth small,' and she told us stories, they were cutting the eyelids of the girls in her village and she ran inside and hid; in that staid Englishly Ife setting the underlying savagery of the place kept looming out at you. Did you ever talk to a Nigerian, your students, about cannibalism, human sacrifice, slavery, eating the heart of kings, throwing twins into the bush, rainmaking, spreading small-pox germs on pieces of cloth, etc.? I have a few stories. Anyway, Sokharee is growing up to be a proper English lady, but for a while, those short incredible months when she had just come out of the bush, she was trembling between civilization and the savage, and each day she was more the five year old English girl and less the savage, except she will have dreams, all her life in her Kensington flat or wherever, she will have flickering nightmares about great war canoes, hundreds of feet long, rushing down parallel streams to meet and clash at the confluence, the drums bombarding the night. You know what happened of course. Horton's wife died in childbirth, leaving twins stillborn, the night JW sat bolt upright in the Rest House and had a sudden flash of vision that Cohen was dead and came to our house at four in the morning, and crept in the high wet grass tapping at the screen, trying to wake us but not really—finally feeling foolish and going back, but not to sleep. The next morning she met Cohen accidentally at UCI and threw her arms around him, sobbing heavily; he was utterly bewildered. That was before they were lovers. JW always claimed creeping around the house that night she smelled death in the air, her soul was clenched against a tragedy. I really did come to believe she had supernatural powers, I've never felt that, even entertained the feeling, about anyone else, but I felt she could look clear deep into a person, as if tissue and bone were so much air and plumb to the absolute truth of him. So it would have meant a lot to me, would have an air of finality, if she had ever said, you are weak, superficial, flashy, a puller of strings with no weight of your own—everybody worries about these things—but actually she said quite the opposite and it's the strongest sense of myself I have ever gotten from another. She knew, goddamn it, Gruberg, she was a supernatural angel-witch and she knew. I spent a lot of time in Ogbonosho, I think eight or ten incredible Honda trips, I knew every curve and pothole in the road, every stream with the women bathing, the unfinished churches waiting for another burst of fund raising from the congregation in Seven Oaks, Michigan or wherever—but ultimately she was a smothering physical presence, great in size and great in intensity, like running the hundred yard dash or boxing fifteen rounds, you could as if smell her flesh, her hair like pins, the least shift of emotion radically changed her physically, turned the color of her skin from gold to green, made her flesh stink like cattle or effuse like roses, turned that gold hair into a limp draggle, bumps appeared on her face, her thighs and arms grew bruises, bright raspberries that had come from nowhere. ... She found a crimson thread in her pocket and held it up to the white wall and saw shapes, saints marching, women pulling their hair and cradling babies, so she'd move to her brushes in a kind of a trance, not because she had a two week vacation and had scheduled the time to paint, not because she had laid in supplies (she used Milton for a base)—but because the flame of god was on her and she had no choice. Twenty-four or forty hours later it was a mural and she dumped into a deep sleep and she woke, putting a lantern to the wall—Did I do that? did I do that? And it was full of naked and shrieking women, cuntlike and wailing, and the most amazing thing, the villagers came in droves to see the painting, came to touch and sit entranced before a painting that violated everything the Catholic Church had ever told them. Ultimately, she was too big for Cohen.

You know, the days were spitting images of each other, the sun up at seven in the morning and down at seven at night, it getting light and dark very quickly, with a lot of suffused light in the air, scarlets and blues. And the very greatest time was at sunset when for a temporary time everything became mellow, soft, the seeds and gnats were whizzing in the air, on the loo back road to Ife so thick you got an insect in the eye, but it was a great time because in this deepening dusk the Hausa traders were making their way home, peddling slowly full of fatigue, or walking with dull numb steps after a hard day. ... You'd wave to them and they'd throw a tired wave in return: they were streaming from all parts of the campus back to their homes. This was the time of day the great cattle market across the Ife road was folding up its business, the shrewd old Fulanis under their multicolored parasols and chin beards like Fuller brushes having unloaded their beasts to the suave, oily, apple-cheeked Yorubas—and the great cattle stampede was on. This was the great time! the floods of people, hopping in and out of Morris Minor cabs, the streets choked with these silly black bugs of autos, the women in glorious up-and-downs waiting under parasols for lifts, the little boys precariously balancing galvanized buckets of water invariably spilling over, the traders with their methodical peddling and wares often sitting on the tops of their heads, or the long treks of Quality, with his never-saying slaves mutely following barefoot behind. ... The Yorubas choked the cattle around the neck and had a long rope trailing from the foreleg, and were most times seen chasing the beast in hot pursuit, so incompetent were they, and so easily did a Fulani cow smell Yoruba fear. You know the scene: the beast in full trot, having broken free, up and over the railroad tracks, darting and dodging and stopping to sniff the air, until the Yorubas crept close, then with a lurch off again. You've seen the Yorubas at the end of the rope being pulled skiddingly for a hundred yards, the cow utterly in command, until the rope could be held onto no longer, and the breakaway took place.
like that bit about everyone selling exactly what her neighbor sold! How true. The great coming together of everything took place at Mokola roundabout, with shaved-headed bravos naked to the waist lounging in the center circle of grass, and the cows running round and round and round, trailing ropes, and these swearing, shouting cowards of Yoruba herdsmen, dressed in the raggiest rags, trying to step on the rope end—whatever that would do. The cattle were head-high among the cars and the policemen with their knitted brows were overwhelmed. The kerosene lamps were spurring to life, the ground under the little lean-tos were being swatch-swept, brushing the dirt off the dirt, the stream of people and cars meeting and mixing with cattle in a great crunch at the roundabout was magnificent to behold. The Yorubas were so stupid. If by some miracle they were able to corral the cow, they immediately punished it, lashing it across the nose or rump or balls with hard zinging knotted ropes. The cows that sank to their knees and refused to budge for them! A mound of cattle-flesh that they were helpless to move. The cow lay there sanguinely while the Yorubas shouting curses and zinging ropes danced around it. We often remarked, one Hausaboy, picking weeds and squatting unconcernedly by the side of the road could manage ten cows, while ten Yoruba, armed to the teeth, couldn't handle one.

Now this is what I call a thread, the separateness of man from man, and particularly heightened in the Nigerian context, because all you can do is master the forms, get the slickest possible gloss of operating in Nigerian society, bowing the bows and greeting the greetings. I remember Cohen making his way to the Chairman’s table at Peter’s baby’s naming ceremony, no, it was a dancer’s troupe of which Peter was a member, all these midwesterners, at the bar around the corner from the Easy Life, anyway they called Cohen up to the chairmain’s table, and as he went a murmur spread through the crowd, ‘He knows our people, he speaks our language!’ This was after Cohen had spent three weeks in Peter’s village. But Cohen was a great subconscious masterer of the forms, and they loved him for it. ‘He knows our people, he speaks our language!’ But that didn’t close the gap any, this is what I knew in my heart of hearts was the sickening thing about Peace Corps training, at best it would make us a masterer of forms, fluid subtle workers in the society, and no closer to anyone for that, while JW, in her totally nonawake completely animal instinct way kept saying, ‘Why are they telling us these things, Weiss. What on earth does it have to do with the people?’ The people was her game. She got close to people, penetrated to the heart. I told you about the Professor, she went back to Ogbomosho, saw him trudging on this dirt road, threw her arms about him and his about her, stood there crying like babies, that 85 year old Yoruba and that crazy American girl. I could never never do it because penetration to the heart of a Nigerian was a hell of a lot harder than penetrating to the heart of an American and I had never shown any particular faculty for that. This is the real gut thing, Gruberg, the fact that it was all sham and on the surface in Nigeria, passing out those greetings, and praising the shit out of the food, not that the food was praised if it wasn’t good, but it was a pole vaulting way into the affections of others and ultimately didn’t mean shit. I knew it in training, I knew it the first month I was over there, I knew I would never get close to more than a few people in all the world, Myers, Zinoman, Jo Anne, with everything opening up, but you always like to think it can be more than that, you like to think that lightning is going to descend in Africa, hit you with all those old eternal mysteries, and change you irrevocably in some great and miraculous way, the old Henderson thing, seeking lost mysteries, new secrets, has something to do with what charged me to go off to Africa, not to Utah, or even South America, but Africa—I knew there were no mysteries in Europe, I had tried Europe in my silly romantic way, I just pushed my mysteries back a notch, onto a new continent, Henderson, Henderson. I read it fortuitously during training, and I had it on my person the day J arrived. Myers is the closest thing I know to Henderson in this life. I don’t know any other JW’s, fictional or otherwise.

The point I’m still trying to make is, yes, it was all surface and sham, and maybe we knew it from the beginning, but we didn’t want to believe it, and we went on disbelieving it to the bitter end, yes, it’s the gut of the affair, but not revealed as such, not in an admitting way, til something like now, much, much, after the fact. I’m not saying any of this seriousness will get into the book, maybe the book will be from beginning to end screamingly funny, not a sombre thought dropped, but a serious book still, and that means having a serious apprehension of what it all meant, even if it never gets in. I can’t see us not writing a serious book, a book almost bigger than its subject, even if hilarious. Hemingway said something about the Old Man and the Sea I’ve always liked, that he knew so much about the Caribbean, and deep-sea fishing, knew so much about depredating sharks, that he could afford to leave 99% of it out, the cold feeling and power would seep its way through. We’re not going to leave 99% out but maybe quite a bit, a lot of Cohen and JW, maybe a lot of the sombre and serious infrastructure. People will come away feeling kicked in the gut, and why the hell was that, because all they’ve been doing is laughing, there’s not a serious line in the book. That would be awfully great artistry. I don’t know what you mean by The Silence and wish you’d try to spell it out. I think maybe something that explains the conspiracy theory as it prevails in the States, about the assassination, is that in this land of rosy spirits and successful people it is difficult if not impossible for them to believe that a man has slipped across the line into absolute despair, that despair is something that has no right breeding in the rich humu
of the American soil, that if you can turn a buck and buy a car and have this world of entertainment on every hand how is it possible to despair? But I believe people kick over the line, good people, healthy people, people with all the treasures, education, etc. Maybe this is what’s happening to Cohen now. Baldwin described it well, when he was in Paris and arrested by the police for stealing a sheet, he broke down in the paddy wagon, sobbed and sobbed, in less than ten years he would be on Time’s cover, the zenith of success as it’s represented in America, but in that paddy wagon, he was crossing the line. This is the American lie: that no one has the right in this rosy land to absolute despair. Oswald made immediate sense to me, and strangely enough to a guy who I regard my chief competitor, he’s written the best book so far about the Peace Corps, but still a poor piddling perfumed book, not one-tenth the book that mine will be—Twenty-one Twice, Mark Harris. He remarked that Oswald was very much like himself, something of a loner, wanted to write, vague affiliation with left wing causes, etc., etc., a mildly courageous characterization to make, given the absolute distaste with which Oswald is regarded.

There is another thread to the story, that Africa had the effect of driving a sane man a little crazy. I remember Hondaing into your compound making all the racket in the world, right under your window, and Gruberg inside, sitting deep in an easy chair twiddling on his recorder with a single flickering candle for light never budging. Even pounding at the door, I’d have to pound several times before I could penetrate through to you. They always said that if you spend long enough in Africa your health deteriorates, but I’m wondering if your sanity as well. I know I was a little crazy at times—’not myself’—the kind of slight craziness like a hand passing in front of a window, that you tend to forget about when you leave the place. I never drank before I went to Africa, I don’t particularly drink now, but now I understand what drink does, and why people plough it down, how it takes a tense stomach and softens out the folds, how it does away with a tenseness choking you in the throat. I was in a pretty crazy state after I left for Greece, partly out of worry, worry for her, and partly because Africa was up to here in me and driving me a little crazy. I think Cohen was experiencing something of the same at the end, with his stomach problems. I flew away to Greece and in a twinkling the tenseness lifted, as if it had never existed.

I want the Scala to be a classic episode, the fire-flickerings outside, Open Goutter beyond, the stretched out Hausas, in their long nightshirts, the boys flopped and squinting through the boards, glimpsing the top of the screen and going airplane pictures, what they sell, how you sit, the ineffable hardness of the seats, shifting positions, lying sideways, the raving smells, the bravos stripping off their bubas and sitting massively, rippingly naked, the old sloused Hausas whores, always up front, Soyinka the man of the people refusing to sit in the front section, the night the front section—they weren’t selling tickets to whites, and Korman broke down the box office, the mints, the cigarettes at a penny-penny, rushing out at the end and jumping on your Honda, like sprinting to a horse, the cold cuttingness of the air, Gruberg, Gruberg! that was good stuff, good memories, great glorious place the Scala, and Cohen’s whimsical little story, How the Scala came to Sabo, one of the most finely balanced sentences I’ve ever had the pleasure to read (we, Cohen and me, used to refer to Hemingway’s sentence, ‘In the fall the war was always there, but we didn’t go to it anymore.’)—I think the Cohenus was a great figure, the towel around his waist and the chubby belly in rolls, the hunched over serious intelligent way he had of walking, riding herd one night for rubbers and noticing on the back of the pack, For Empire Use Only—inferior latex I presume, no decent fuck-abiding Englishman would use a blackman’s sheath. Anything about what they felt about the U.S. The Peace Corpse. Ominous, what? They came to me after Kennedy’s death and expressed sympathies, but they didn’t feel it, it was an act of form. Ohunloyo would have bet his two Citroens that Johnson did it. That’s how it worked in Nigeria.

The Scala! throwing up its glow across the race-course. Red front, with stiff white tilted toen—inevitably a letter out. A magnet in the heart of Sabo drawing the Hausas like so many filings at its foot. The wide open yawning black gulf of the race course. (I once fucked J standing up in the middle of the racecourse, pitch-black, but sweeping white folds flickering visible in the small distance). The great lorries herding like tired cattle for the night. Furious activity of winding the kola in great truncated cones with leafy bedding for moisture, the Hausas in their long straight nightshirts in their long straight bodies, with a little cup of a beanie, phlegmatic people. I remember after an extravaganza at the Scala one night Cohen and I stopped in a petrol station around there, and began throwing banter with a lorry driver who was going to Sokoto. The lorry was laden with kola, the Hausas lying in awkward positions among the cones—the door was open, invitingly. I looked at Cohen. Cohen looked at me. ‘Let’s go, Cohen.’ I was testing it in the air. If he had said yes, off we went. But it was midnight and classes to teach the next day. ‘Another time, Weiss.’ I liked those possibilities about Nigeria. The sides of the Scala were slapped up with the coming attractions, a lot of splashy advertisements, Coming Soon, or Next Week, but most of the time the film never appeared. Some films were so popular they didn’t appear several times a year, the ads went up. Small parking lot that was jammed with cars in every crazy position when a movie of extraordinary reputation was playing. We used to race our Hondas up the side and neatly park
next to the wall. But more than a few times I was tapped on the shoulder: requested to park in the lot, the Mattar brothers couldn’t take responsibility for the security of my vehicle in that place. What about the splinters in my ass? The mythological Mattar brothers! The place was alive with stands, arcades, soft yellow-flamed kerosen lamps, myriad Hausamen with great shaved skulls and ballooning white pantaloons stretched out on reed mats for the night, somehow finding the tumult restful... The swarm around the ticket windows. The early performance was 1/2, which shot up to 1/9 later, and occasionally soared to 3/6 when James Bond came. The Mattar brothers had intelligently with great foresight built two ticket windows to handle the crowds but with surrealistic stupidity always kept one of them shut. Then I figured out that the second window was to retreat to, in case of unruly uprisings—as happened the time Korman smashed in one window. There were as many prices as there were caste gradations, 2/11, 4/6, 5/9—I do believe if Akintola himself had ever showed up the Mattar brs would have shown their gratitude and appreciation by allowing him to pay ten bob and sit out the back in the parking lot. I once sat in the 4/6 seats and couldn’t hear a thing. Of course it wasn’t the greatest acoustics anywhere in the theatre, especially with the incessant buzzing rising to a subliminal roar, the constant roar of noise inside the Scala! ha ha—that’s why going to the cinema in Lagos was such a shock, the silence deafened, people actually watched the film instead of getting up and moving around and holding boisterous conversations with friends. The audience sat with hands folded. But you know, the Scala went to the trouble of soundproofing the place, which involved painting the ceiling and walls in great soundproof-looking squares, orange alternating with blue. I could never get out of the place. The tickets you bought at the Scala said United Food Campaign or Max’s Carwash, the same tickets you got when you went to the annual fair on the racecourse, or the Baptist Church, or Greensprings pool—the important thing was to have something that looked like tickets, and I’m sure the ticket-taker at the door never had the slightest idea what the mystical act of ripping a ticket in two accomplished. So that was the Scala, hullabaloo outside, walking through the women selling nuts and gum and penny-penny stale cigarettes, each crying out beseeingly to master buy, the tap on the shoulder, move your transport, sah, the tier seating and suave, languid Lebanese sitting with their backs to the wall, swiveling your head to take in everyone who’s there, the cream of Ibadan society, jumping that ditch with the sign ‘Open Gutter beyond’, braving the swamp smells, while across the street, sunk below ground level, highlife clubs, a barbershop the width of a telephone booth, with its teetering chair that didn’t go up and down at the press of a lever, the strip of hairstyles in garish cartoon (one of them Kennedy) to choose from... I remember JW striking up a conversation with a little Hausa kid, as we were waiting in line to buy tickets. He wouldn’t say anything but he nodded. ‘Do you like cinema?’ He nodded. ‘Do you ever go cinema?’ He nodded no. The upshot was she turned to me and said, Christ the poor kid lives here and has never seen a film, I’m going to buy him a ticket. So she gave him the money and he naturally—ran away into the night. The music from the highlife palaces across the street rose to such a din you couldn’t hear the movie, slicing right through the walls, and that as a matter of fact is what happened in a calculated campaign when the Scala came to Sabo, and the Mattar brs welshed on an agreement to hire only Hausas—each night as the movie started the external noise of Hausas pounding drums and beating drums obliterated sound (I can imagine them whacking the sides of the theater itself). You walked in the 1/9 door and the ticket-taker had a second, and his second had a second, and so which of the three or four people did you hand it to, I handed it to someone who handed it to someone else, etc., around the circle. I liked the part in Sodom and Gomorrh when the Queen stepped down from her carriage, and the black slave knelt giving her his back for a step and the place went wild, a kind of wild roar rose, not indignation, but something almost the opposite, a roar of delight that black men were pulling down such big parts in the pictures, but not quite that even, you could see the toothy yellow smiles gaping big in the dark—I can’t exactly put my finger on it. But many times I felt like sinking down in on myself at the old American version of Africa, with savages in leopard skins around a beating drum jumping up and down with spears and bones through their nose, with no awareness that there was such a thing as grace in the way Yoruba move, beauty in their women, and genius in their music. The moviemakers never conceived that one day their products would be shown in the Scala Cinema, Ibadan, in a newly independent nation, a member of the United Nations, with such a thing as Peace Corps Volunteers sitting in the cheap seats, among people they liked and respected while on the screen passed these terrible distortions. The mystery that always remained was how those Hausamen got the 1/9 to go to the cinema. The cattleherd by day became the elegant moviegoer by night. The two Hausawomen whore, fat, sloppy, pushing sixty, lizardlike in the face, cigarette smoking, looking like gypsies. Remember the kid knocking around with the container of soft drinks! He used to squeeze down your row clouting your shins even if it was early and you were the only one in the theater. Then you’d buy a drink and he’d have to run across the street for a bottle opener. There was a Gent’s toilet and one for Ladies, but the men used both. Ha ha! They advertised in the Daily Times: Ramau Rau, Pathetic Indian Movie! They went through the motions of civilization, appointing a board in Lagos to decide whether the movie was X or A or U, a movie to which no sixteen year olds or younger might attend, a superfarse, the Mattar brothers not about to refuse anyone, and the soft-drink seller was himself only 12.
child labor laws for Nigeria about a hundred years off into the future. The things that led to public scandals and toppled governments in America nobody gave a thought to in Nigeria (pure food and drug laws, etc.) I am just scratching the surface. . !