

## A Field Season on the Zambian Plateau

### 1. Prologue

The grass has wilted, and its last few seeds  
Lie scattered on sun-dried and hostile ground.  
We'll leave the town to start our season's round  
And find a site that meets our simple needs  
For wood and water, shade and thatching reeds  
And easy access to the land around  
To use the tools by which past men have found  
The hidden treasure that old rock concedes.  
Our main drive there will be the people's right  
To use the wonders that their hills may hold  
And these indeed are things we hope to find.  
With luck we'll stumble on a new mine site,  
With stains of copper or the glint of gold,  
Or understanding that delights the mind.

### 2. May. The beginning of the dry weather

Unclouded Sun has burnt away all green  
From grass and leaf. We see the Earth's bare bones  
All through this land of brown and yellow tones,  
And everywhere the rocks we seek are clean.  
For six dry months we'll range the hills we've seen  
Today, and, climbing to these eagles' thrones,  
Record descriptions of their ancient stones  
And try to work out what our finds may mean.  
We'll pitch our tents near where a flowing stream  
Cascades down rocks through all months of the year  
To give us water for a dozen men.  
We'll make a camp, which soon will start to seem  
Our home, but pleasing though it may appear  
Within four weeks we'll have to move again.

### 3. July. Cold Season

We crawl from blankets into freezing cold  
To find the sky jet black and stars gem clear.  
No hint of haze or veiling atmosphere  
Cuts down the glory that such nights unfold.  
Beneath the stars the grass is brown and old  
Yet bright with crystal, for the woods appear  
A winter garden once or twice each year  
When hoar frost glitters for an hour's short hold.  
Quite soon we'll sweat, when in the day's full heat  
We force our bodies up steep rocky slopes:  
We know our duties, and we must comply.  
We toil in patience till our work's complete  
Then after dark we talk of fears and hopes  
And scan the star clouds of the southern sky.

### 4. December. The beginning of the Rains

As wind swirls lift their cores of long-still dust  
The thin, flat clouds that only days ago  
Would soon dissolve, now all begin to grow  
And rise in promise of their long-held trust.  
One cloud base bursts in downdraught rags. Each gust  
Can tear off branches as its raging flow  
Brings back the rain. In days green seedlings show  
As growth breaks surface through the softened crust.  
One month from now this even, grassy lawn  
Will stand in spears above a man's full height.  
We'll leave for town, to stay there until May:  
When storm rain batters we'll be safely gone.  
I'll eat a simple dinner every night,  
Then sit with friends to watch sheet lightning play.

Alexander Smith

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