

A Grave in the Sand

Bessie Head: The Life and Death of a South African Writer

This is series of incidents from the final years and from the funeral of the writer Bessie Head, written by the Danish historian Maria Rytter. As the first curator of the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe in Botswana, she officially opened the Museum in 1985. In 1986 she established the Khama Archive and the Bessie Head Papers as archives of the same Museum.

Although she did not know Bessie very well, in the days following Head's death she was very busy. In addition to the activities and events recounted below, she wrote the first obituary of Bessie Head. It appeared in the funeral programme and in Mmegi wa Dikgang. It emphasised Head's place in African and world literature.

Immediately following Bessie Head's funeral on 27th April 1986, Ms Rytter sat down and wrote a handwritten account of the events that had so moved her. She then laid it aside for nearly three years until she was able to look at it again in Denmark. On the basis of this draft and her memory, in January 1989 she wrote out a longer text entitled "Bessie Head – the Life and Death of a South African Writer". The words "A Grave in the Sand" were added in pencil.

This text lay unpublished in a folder until the Serowe Museum contacted Maria Rytter in 2006, on roughly the twentieth anniversary of Bessie Head's death, looking for information on the origins of the Bessie Head Papers. The following translation from the Danish was prepared by Mary McGovern shortly thereafter. The copy-editor, Tom Holzinger, converted a few passages to footnotes and added three editorial footnotes for accuracy.

Maria Rytter, MA, has curated many historical exhibitions. Her work includes an exhibition at the Serowe museum about Seretse and Ruth Khama followed by an ethnographic portrait of Botswana upon her return to Denmark. In 2000 she prepared a photo biography of Nelson Mandela, to which he contributed the Foreword. She has also made documentary films for television shown in many countries around the world.

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A Grave in the Sand

Bessie Head: The Life and Death of a South African Writer

by Maria Rytter

Prologue

I do not know if I became friends with the writer Bessie Head, but I had a burning desire to do so. Fate would have it that I knew Bessie Head during the last year and a half of her life. I celebrated her last birthday for her — she reached the age of only 48 — and after her death I established an archive of her manuscripts and papers in Serowe. When she was to be buried, I was given the task of taking part in digging her grave, which took place in the early hours of 27th April 1986 — an step that according to tradition is never attended by women, but is carried out by men alone during the hours between midnight and dawn.

With her very first book Bessie Head became famous beyond the bounds of the African continent, and after her books were published in the USA she could earn enough during those years to support herself and her little son. For the fee she received for her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, written in 1968, she built a small, 30-m² house. The house is made of concrete bricks with a tin roof, and has two small rooms separated by a tiny hall with a built-in kitchen and a bathroom. She wrote her novels in her bedroom. Squeezed between her bed and the wall was a little table with her typewriter. She loved the view from her writing table, from where she could look out over the Swaneng Mountains, the small thatched houses and the red sandy soil of the Kalahari with its sparse acacia trees.

Her novels and short stories were gradually translated into German, Dutch, French, Norwegian and Swedish, and her short stories appeared in countless anthologies of African literature. Despite the fact that Bessie Head is regarded as one of Africa's most significant writers, we in Denmark know only one of her books, namely *Maru*, which in Danish is entitled *Gul Marguerit* (Københavns Bogforlag 1985).

It was difficult, if not impossible, for her to have any control of her short stories when they were published in magazines or anthologies far from Botswana. An incessantly recurring problem for her was that she was cheated of her fee by both publishers and agents. She told me that this happened with her novels too; a novel was once published in Zimbabwe without her permission and without her receiving a fee.

When I first met her she was living on an advance for an autobiography, which she was to write later. And she made a living selling her previous book, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, to all those she ran into. The publisher then deducted this money from the six-monthly statements of sales. Another small source of income for her was the Cape gooseberry jam that she made and sold to the village's few development aid workers and other white residents.

A Grave in the Sand

I met Bessie Head for the first time on the main road near her house. She was standing, hitching a lift, and I picked her up. I felt very honoured when I discovered that I was giving a ride to the famous writer. I had already read her books in Denmark, and since then I had hoped to be able to meet her.

From my first meeting with Bessie Head in October 1984 until her birthday on 6th July 1985, a slight but delicate connection developed between us. I acknowledged and admired her as a writer and a human being, and she let me sit by her feet while she shared her poetic wisdom with me. I interviewed her twice. In July 1985, when it was her 48th birthday, my eldest daughter Laura baked her a cake, which we took over to her little house. When we arrived there, we found that no one was celebrating her birthday with her, and so we immediately invited her to our house for an improvised birthday dinner.

During those days we had living with us a young South African refugee. During the South African attack on Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, on 14th June 1985, his house had been blown up and an innocent man had been killed instead of him. Since then he had gone underground while waiting to get a passport from the UN High Commission for Refugees. He wished to leave Botswana and reach safety from the South African army, which had begun to attack refugees in neighbouring countries with letter bombs and car bombs, or with special units with machine guns and hand grenades.

The dinner began well. The young revolutionary and the older writer exchanged information about their lives and experiences with the South African regime. The air vibrated with gusto, and I felt that History in the very flesh walked around my dining table. Then something went wrong between the two refugees, and fear and trepidation snuck in among us. I did not find out how it happened, but when for the third time Bessie Head said, "The person you eat dinner with today is perhaps the person who will send you a letter bomb tomorrow", our young friend left the table and the room. He did not turn up again until after we had driven Bessie Head to her home many hours later.

We then did our level best to remove the uneasy atmosphere, playing good jazz from the thirties, which Bessie Head loved, and drinking beer and wine and dancing, but it made no difference. I was unhappy about having brought the two refugees together. It was to have been her evening, and instead we had reminded her of her unfortunate status as a refugee. My vast Danish ignorance had brought them together, and many times since then I have bewailed the fact that I spoiled the birthday that no one could know was to be her last.

After that evening I could feel that Bessie Head did not really trust me. But before all this happened, the Danish photographer Lis Steincke and I had interviewed and photographed Bessie Head. The occasion was the publication of her book *Maru* in Danish. This interview was to be the finale of our friendship. One day in November 1985, I drove proudly and happily out to her house in order to read my finished article aloud to her before sending it off to the Danish daily newspaper *Politiken*.

When I arrived, Bessie Head was deeply depressed, but I did not sense it. Over the years she had had several mental breakdowns, but I was so eager to please by reading my article aloud to her that I began as soon as she let me. I did not get any further than the sentence at the beginning about how her tiny little house expressed her financial situation before she broke down completely. She

grabbed a knife from the draining tray and waved it in her hand as she chased me out of her house while shouting, "They steal my work, they steal my work." She only threatened me, and the knife was merely a table knife, but the experience of raw anxiety mixed with humiliation lent a dismal tinge to the entire scene. I babbled reassuringly, "Bessie, Bessie, Bessie," while, in as dignified a way as possible for both her sake and mine, I ran in confusion out to my car closely followed by Bessie Head brandishing her knife.

With my teeth chattering in my mouth, I sped home in my car. I had unfortunately achieved the opposite of what I had hoped, and at first I considered throwing the article in the bin. When it came down to it, I did not do so. It was needed in Denmark in connection with the launch of her first book to be translated into in Danish.¹ As an attempt at buying indulgence, I later put the fee towards the cost of her funeral.

After that incident I saw her only from a distance in the village. But we had two friends in common, Hugh and Mmatsela Pearce, who on 18th April 1986 told me that Bessie Head had died quite unexpectedly in Serowe Hospital on the evening before. A ward sister had rung them saying: "Bessie Head is dying here in the hospital, and there is no one to sit with her. Everyone here is up in arms about the fact that she is lying here alone with no family around her. Will you come and sit with her?" They immediately went to the hospital, and sat by the deeply unconscious writer's side for the rest of the day. They went home only very briefly to change clothes and collect some food, and while they were away Bessie Head died without coming out of her coma.²

Bessie Head reached the age of only 48. Many years of poverty and poor nutrition had broken down her resistance. A violent, untreated inflammation of the liver (hepatitis) finished her off within a few weeks. She lived on her own with her dog Pa, and her care for the dog was one of the reasons that she refused to go to the hospital until it was too late.

Mmatsela Pearce had been friends with Bessie Head since the 1960s. She was in despair about the funeral arrangements: "We have to do something. She will die like a dog. We have to prepare her funeral. She will die like a dog if we don't do something."

I did not understand what Mmatsela meant by dying like a dog, as I had never attended a funeral in the village. My concern was not the funeral at all. I feared that someone would break into the little empty house to steal. Perhaps there was correspondence there, including names of people who were against the regime in South Africa. There were spies everywhere, and a quick break-in could perhaps supply compromising material and destroy the possibility of ever being able to erect a monument in her memory, apart from her published books.³

She had died of hepatitis, a highly contagious inflammation of the liver, and the nurses had worn masks and gloves while they were looking after her, said

¹ Maria Rytter: "En blomst fra Botswana" [A Flower from Botswana], *Politiken*, 29 December 1985.

² Editor's note: This was the experience of another friend. In fact Hugh and Mmatsela Pearce stayed at the hospital and held Bessie Head's hand as she passed away.

³ Editor's note: As it turned out, Bessie had remained firmly non-political in Botswana. Her papers reveal only a consistent dislike of politicians and political parties.

Mmatsetla. So the first thing we did was to go to her house to clean it and disinfect it. We had to have prior permission to enter the house from the local District Commissioner, Mr. Bergsman Sentle. We received his permission without any problem, and at the same time I was given permission to move all her personal papers and manuscripts to the Khama III Memorial Museum where I worked, in order to keep them safe.

There was some washing-up to do in the little kitchen in the hall. Her bed was not made, but otherwise the house was meticulously clean. Mmatsetla and I boiled litres upon litres of water, and scalded and scrubbed everything, whether clean or dirty. We took the bed linen off the bed and, where we in Denmark would have burned it, we scalded it with boiling water and washed it by hand. Obviously we both speculated about how contagious her illness was, but we did not talk about it.

Afterwards we gathered up her papers. It turned out that she had kept copies of her correspondence and arranged it year by year. In drawers there were personal greetings from African, English and American writers, and even one from a Danish writer. There we also found presumably the only prize she ever received during her lifetime, "The Unsung Writers' Award for Powerful Writing Deserving Great Recognition in the United States." The prize is awarded annually by the prestigious literary magazine *Mother Jones*. It was the writer Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) who had nominated her for the prize. In a letter enclosing the prize the organisers told her about the wonderful dinner and after-dinner party they had had in New York in her honour — without inviting her.

Under the bed there were boxes of academic theses and papers on her work sent to her by students and professors from all over the world. I went through her bookshelves for books with dedications or personal notes, and took them to the Museum too, along with her typewriter. I left the rest for her son, so that he would not return to his childhood home stripped of all possessions.⁴

As soon as we had cleaned the house the preparations for the funeral began. Apart from her son, Howard Head, she had no family at all. From her correspondence we would later see that she had tried to obtain the names of her biological mother and father from the court registry in Pietermaritzburg, but she had never received an answer to her enquiries. Her son Howard was difficult to find. He was living in South Africa, and he did not come home until the day before the funeral. As a Botswana citizen he was not subject to the life-long exile suffered by his mother.

The memorial ceremony at her house was carried out according to Tswana custom. Every morning groups of villagers came to sit on the ground in her garden. Throughout the day the mourners replaced one another, so that people could go home and do their most essential chores. One of Bessie Head's more wealthy friends, Cassim Kikia, came with tarpaulins and poles, so that a big outdoor tent providing shade could be put up in front of the house. Beside the

⁴ Later I succeeded in raising funds in Denmark for the Museum to buy Bessie Head's papers from her son at a decent price, so that he could be compensated for the possibility he would have had to sell the material at auction. I also succeeded in raising funds from the Danish development aid agency, Danida, to finance an initial registration of her papers — work that began after I left the museum in November 1986.

tent there were large three-legged pots boiling over a long fire. The many funeral guests came with small gifts, such as tea, bread and milk; and the shopkeepers gave onions, sorghum flour and meat, so that the mourners, true to tradition, could be fed during the memorial ceremonies. The priests from the village came in turns to lead prayers and hymn singing. Bessie Head's body was placed in a mortuary in the undertaker's cold store, and was not brought back to the house until the evening before the funeral.

While all of this was going on, an ad hoc committee worked hectically to tie up all the arrangements for out of town guests. The anchormen were Hugh Pearce and Cassim Kikia. As she was Botswana's only world-famous writer, they thought she should have a funeral worthy of a statesman. Telexes were sent to the world's press; telegrams were sent to her contacts in the USA and England. And invitations were sent out to all the ambassadors and officials in the capital Gaborone.⁵

I took part in the final night's mourning vigil at Bessie Head's house. She herself lay in the little bedroom in a coffin on two trestles. On a carpet on the floor, close to the coffin, sat three women with straight backs, their legs stretched straight out in front of them under the trestles. One of them was her friend Bosele Sianana, who throughout the week had quite naturally taken the lead in the memorial ceremonies around the house. Now she sat there with the two women, who were perhaps her friends or sisters, and held a vigil over the dead body during this last night.

I sat with over a hundred mourners out in the garden under the raised tarpaulin. Throughout the evening I listened to the most beautiful polyphonic hymn singing, which was sung since sunset, interrupted only by the plaintive prayers of the priest. In spite of the mournful atmosphere, I sat and felt happy that Bessie Head had so many close friends in the village. They were mostly old women and men, but towards nightfall one young man after another dropped in and respectfully sat on the ground, and I wondered that she had apparently enjoyed the friendship of so many young men.

Around midnight a disturbance arose. Hugh Pearce came to me and said that the men who were to dig the grave wanted to be driven out to the burial ground. There were many cars around the house, but for one reason or another they wanted me — and the museum's car — to take part. We left in three cars and soon reached the large burial ground of the Botlaote tribe, which is beautifully situated at the foot of a little mountain ridge that divides the residential area of the Botlaote tribe from the residential areas of the other groups in the village. I knew that it was strictly forbidden for women to take part in digging the grave, but when I showed signs of driving back to the house, I was told to stay. Only then did I discover that I did not know any of the 27 men, and that almost the entire team consisted of the young men who had arrived during the evening.

Twenty-five men are standing close together looking at two others who, sweating profusely, are digging the cement-hard sand. It is about two o'clock in the morning and the only light the men have is the incredibly enormous, starry,

⁵ Bessie Head's status as a refugee in Botswana was difficult in many ways. To this must be added that she as a person was both controversial and highly unpredictable, so invitations to official banquets in Botswana were few and far between. But the population of Serowe both accepted and respected her.

moonless sky arching over the tribal burial ground. The men are talking loudly around the hole in the sand, sometimes interrupted by a loud outburst of laughter. I sit behind them on the running board of the museum's Toyota Land Cruiser. The car door is open because I need the light from the little lamp above the rear-view mirror. I sit and make some notes in my diary in order to try to capture the night that the writer Bessie Head's grave was dug by twenty-seven men from the Botlaote tribe in the village of Serowe in the country of Botswana in southern Africa.⁶ They stand shoulder to shoulder and take turns digging the grave. At the beginning I stand with them and see how the first two men dig the beginning of the rectangular hole. The top layer of sand is loose and light, and I doubt that it will take between four and five hours to finish, as I had been told it would.

Laughter rings out again, and suddenly I think that it sounds rather coarse. I understand only a little of their language and speak even less. For this reason I am very aware of moods. The starlight is so strong that I can make out the contours of the nearest graves. They are close to one another and consist of high, rectangular piles of stones. Here and there an acacia tree stretches its umbrella towards the starry sky, and close to me the mountain slopes upwards. I get up and walk towards the men, and I notice that they will not make a space for me in the circle around the hole. Dispirited I walk stealthily back to my running board and wait patiently for them to finish.

An atmosphere of desolation and discomfort creeps over me. I can feel that the men are uneasy about being at the cemetery. Why have they brought me out here? Why will they not let me drive back to the house, when I am not welcome anyway? While I am sitting regretting that I ever embarked upon this mourning vigil, one of the men comes over to me and asks in a friendly way, in English, if I will drive them out to collect stones for the cairn, the mound over the grave. I get into the driver's seat, and he jumps into the passenger's seat beside me, while the large cargo area fills up with men.

Hesitant and carefully I drive on the sandy slope at the foot of the mountain. Occasionally I am given instructions to turn the car in order to drive up the mountain itself, so that the cones of light from my headlights flash over sand and graves. After searching for a while we find a place with lots of loose stones and boulders. By the glare of my headlights the men begin to quickly fill the luggage compartment with stones.

"Now the axle will break," I think, "especially when they all get in on top of the stones."

But they know what they are doing and send me off with the stones. My passenger speaks excellent English. He tells me that he was a friend of Bessie Head, and he begins to explain the circumstances of what we are doing.

"They call us diphiri, hyenas," he says, "we who dig the grave," and continues, "When a grave is to be dug, the chief sends for the men who are to do it. We can even be punished for not taking part. But then who would dig our graves if we refuse to dig others' graves?"

⁶ Editor's note: The burial ground described here was used by all subgroups of the Bangwato people in Serowe. It also seems unlikely that all the grave diggers came from Botlaote. Men from Morula and Mere wards and some brigade trainees almost certainly took part too.

In Botswana the men dig the graves together, and it is always done between midnight and sunrise. Before the white people came, and thereby Christianity – and that was not more than a hundred and forty years ago – the adults were buried in the floor of the kraal where the cattle were penned up during the night. The morning after the burial the hoofprints hid the precise situation of the grave. Small children were buried under the floor in the hut, where they could lie close to the daily life of their family.

He goes on to tell me that no one feels really comfortable being at the cemetery during the night. Therefore they drink to get up courage before setting off. To my question about what they talk about when they are standing around the grave diggers, he answers that they tell jokes and stories. So that was why I had not been welcome in the band of men. Even if I did not understand their language, I was to be spared the risqué stories they told in order to remove their anxiety and discomfort.

After having unloaded the stones near the hole, we collect two more loads so as to have enough to be able to make the cairn the next day. Suddenly it is four o'clock and the men are finished. My friend from before jumps into the front seat, while the cargo compartment fills up with tired men.

"Now you must watch what happens when we get back to the house," he says. "We must not go in to the mourners in the garden, but have to sit outside the gate. We have to be cleansed before we can be with the others again."

When we get back, the men, stiff and bent, crawl out of the cars and sit on the ground in a large semicircle. I sit on the running board, thereby being the last person in the group. An old man comes out to us from the flock of mourners in the garden.

"Have you finished doing what you had to do?" he asks.

"We have done what we had to do," someone answers.

An old woman comes out with a washbasin filled with water mixed with magical herbs, which she hands to the old man. While the men carry out their ritual of hand-washing in the holy water, I creep in with the mourners under the tarpaulin. I assume that I do not need the magical water. Shortly afterwards tea and bread are given to those of us who have been away, while the others still sing hymns and say prayers. The old man comes over to me and says, "Nothing more will happen now, and you can confidently go home and sleep until the funeral, which starts at 10 am."

Shortly afterwards I lie tired and thoughtful in my bed and listen to my sleeping family. "Why did you ask me to take part when you were going to dig the grave?" I had asked in the car during the night.

"No woman must witness us digging the grave," he had answered, "but you and Bessie can."

And now I have written it all down as he wanted me to.⁷

⁷ Editor's note: The identity of this man is not yet known, despite much local querying.

The next morning people streamed to her little house. Zimbabwe sent its ambassador; unfortunately all the other countries' delegates were conspicuous by their absence. But the Botswana government, the university, the national museum, the library service, schools and colleges sent representatives, and the final ceremony could begin at her house.

Two clergymen, one black and one white, a minister from the Anglican Church and a Roman Catholic priest, preached alternately over Bessie Head's coffin, which had now been moved out under the tarpaulin in front of the house. The garden was full of people, and many had to stand outside on the path, from where they followed the ceremony.

There were many speeches. The headman of the village praised that fact that so many white people had come, but regretted in the same breath that this was normally never the case. As the ceremony progressed, I realised how vital funerals were for Botswana society. They were the pivot on which the original tribal sense of community still turned, and it was through the funerals that society was cemented together socially. In Botswana, death created a sense of community, and the worst thing that one could imagine was that no one took part in one's funeral.⁸

Telegraphic messages of condolences had streamed in from all over the world. Writers and other cultural personalities sent their best wishes to Bessie Head. Two telegrams in particular made an impression on me: one of them was a tribute from the jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (previously Dollar Brand), and the other was from her publisher, who asked when her estate would be wound up.

The coffin was carried out to the hearse, and people flocked out to the hundreds of cars that were parked on the narrow road. The diplomatic car with the Zimbabwean flag was the first car in the cortège following the hearse; behind it car after car followed at a snail's pace. The many people who did not have cars themselves got up into the backs of trucks and into the cars that had space. Every car travelling in the opposite direction pulled respectfully over to the side and waited until the kilometre-long cortège had passed. People on foot squatted down on their haunches by the roadside and also waited until the last car had passed.

By the grave we stood in rows around the white priest and the black minister, who preached in turns beside the newly dug hole. The graveside ceremony was similar to the ceremony we perform in Denmark, but before the shovelfuls of earth, something unexpected happened. The undertaker took a step to the side, squatted on his haunches by a machine – and slowly sank the coffin down into the hole without it having to be lowered with ropes. Then two men grabbed shovels and threw the first shovelfuls of sand into the hole. After a couple of shovelfuls they gave the tools to the next men, so in this way many of the men who had gathered took part in burying her. Meanwhile the mourners sang a hymn with the most poignant melody, while everyone waved sadly towards the hole where Bessie Head's coffin was quickly being covered with sand.

⁸ I had until then never taken part in a funeral, because I had not understood this. Instead I had believed that one had to be invited. Whereas I had regarded myself as being tactful, I was in fact being regarded as impolite and inhumane.

When the large funeral party streamed back to the cars, I could not tear myself away, but remained standing for a while looking at the finished grave, which was like a high, oblong mound of stones consisting of reddish brown pieces of rock in the hot sand. Beside the grave an acacia tree spread its thorny crown and offered the bereaved a little shade. The sun was baking hot, and around Bessie Head's grave lay hundreds of oblong, anonymous mounds of stones. When I went to turn round to go down towards the car, a pair of twittering swallows dived twice towards the grave before flying off cheerfully over the little ridge above the burial ground.

Marking the Grave

Gillian Eilersen is Bessie Head's distinguished biographer. Born in Pietermaritzburg around the same time as Bessie, and later herself a teacher of English literature, she determined to write a life of the elusive novelist. It took her many years of painstaking research, during which she learned the secrets of Bessie's parentage and birth, an exciting story of which Bessie herself had known almost nothing. In 1995 Eilersen published *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears. Her Life and Writing*, which won immediate acclaim. A second edition appeared in 2007.

Ms Eilersen writes about the fragment published here:

"The following passage was originally part of an early draft of the biography... As it contained personal elements and was not appropriate for the closing section of the book, I cut it out. However, on reading Maria Rytter's personal account of Bessie Head's death and burial, I was reminded of my own draft. Making that pilgrimage to Bessie Head's grave had impressed itself on my memory, despite the practical hitches.

"I recall, too, the way the words of one of Bessie's favourite love songs, 'When I've Passed On', began to churn through my head as we searched for the grave. At the same time, the hot sun began to generate images D.H. Lawrence's untraditional grave in Vence. In Bessie Head's early years, especially, she had admired Lawrence's writing. She once dreamt that he visited her and shook her hand."

Marking the Grave

by Gillian Eilersen

The many floral tributes covering the grave were soon scorched in the hot Botswana sun. As is the custom, Bosele Sianana and other friends then covered the mound of earth with the large red stones already prepared and lying next to it.

Time passed. The Bessie Head Committee was hard pressed caring for all the practical problems concerned with the taking over and cataloguing of the enormous number of papers Bessie had left. The grave was temporarily forgotten. Ruth Forchhammer had scratched Bessie's name on one of the larger stones with a ball-point pen, but otherwise it was totally indistinguishable from all the other unnamed mounds.

When I arrived in Serowe in July 1988, the first researcher to study the Bessie Head Papers, and wished to visit the cemetery, Ruth and I trudged round amidst all the mounds, pulling aside the burrs and blackjacks and peering at each in search of the handwritten name on the stone. In vain. After half an hour we had to give up. Here was a grotesque situation indeed: the grave of Africa's greatest black woman novelist "lost".

Was it this that reminded me of the equally grotesque story of the way the urn and ashes of D.H. Lawrence were almost lost on New York Central Station? Or had the rough stone graves already sent my thoughts back to the pictures I had seen of Lawrence's stone-covered grave at Vence in France?⁹ Whichever it was, the similarities remained with me, while the uncanny reality of the unmarked grave brought memories of a line from one of Head's favourite songs: "Let there be no markings for the grave / When I've passed on."

The next day, thanks to Bosele Sianana, whose silent disapproval of this unhappy state of affairs carried her forward with added dignity, we were led straight to the grave.

There was clearly a need for some form of marking. However, the problem of a headstone was not an easy one to solve. An engraved headstone would have had to come from South Africa, a thought that pleased none of the members of the committee. Nor did a shiny black monument seem at all fitting in the setting of the Serowe cemetery. I suggested a piece of natural stone, found close at hand and engraved simply. That was no solution either. No one near Serowe could engrave on stone. Ruth's husband, Per Forchhammer, came up with the answer. Have a metal plate engraved in South Africa and attach it to a fine piece of sandstone from Serowe, he suggested. This was done.

Ruth Forchhammer took on the job of finding the stone. Three times she drove to the outskirts of the village in her rather battered blue truck and walked among the outcrops of rock, which she loved so much. Three times she collected Cas Kikia or another member of the committee to see what she had found. The third time her choice was approved of. The stone was finally unveiled in 1989 at a special ceremony. It is inscribed with Bessie Head's name and the words: "Courage, Selflessness and Love conquers all".

⁹ The English writer D.H. Lawrence was buried in an untraditional grave in Vence, in the south of France. Frieda Lawrence, the writer's wife, had covered the simple mound with many pebbles. Later, when she emigrated to America, she had the body exhumed, cremated and stored in an urn, which, in her confusion, she forgot on New York Central Station.