

A Hillside in Zululand

Mpande hears now, once again, the hypnotic voice of Philangezwi, the village elder.

"First comes a silence more intense than the silence just before dawn, before the birds begin their singing, more intense even than the silence of the universe before creation. It is a silence so deep that it causes the ear to create its own sounds. The wind ceases to whisper through the grass. No swish of swallows is heard through the air. Doves do not coo nor starlings prattle. No cattle low, no dogs bark. Gone is the metallic rattle of flying locusts. No click of cicadas' castanets is heard. Even the clouds seem stationary lest they disturb the silence. Then the surface of the water in pitchers, pails, puddles and ponds begins to ripple. But silence still prevails. Slowly, a vibration is felt through the soles of one's feet. It blossoms into a thrumming that reverberates up the legs, through the abdomen, across the diaphragm and into the chest. Only gradually does the throbbing manifest itself as an auditory signal. Sound builds up slowly as twenty thousand warriors, as yet unseen, advance toward the brow of the hill. They are beating their assegais against their tall, oval cowhide shields. They are stamping their feet against the red earth. They beat, they stamp, they chant in awful synchrony. The sound escalates to a crescendo that outdoes the roar of summer thunder or the crash of stormy seas. Finally, three fine grey lines appear on the crests of the distant hills, one directly ahead, one to the left and one to the right. The three lines pulse and grow into black smudges. The smudges slowly take on human forms as the *amabutho*, regiments, overflow down the hillside like lava from an angry volcano."