

# Staffrider

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 3, 1983 R1.50(excl.GST)

## STORIES:

THE NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES by BHEKI MASEKO

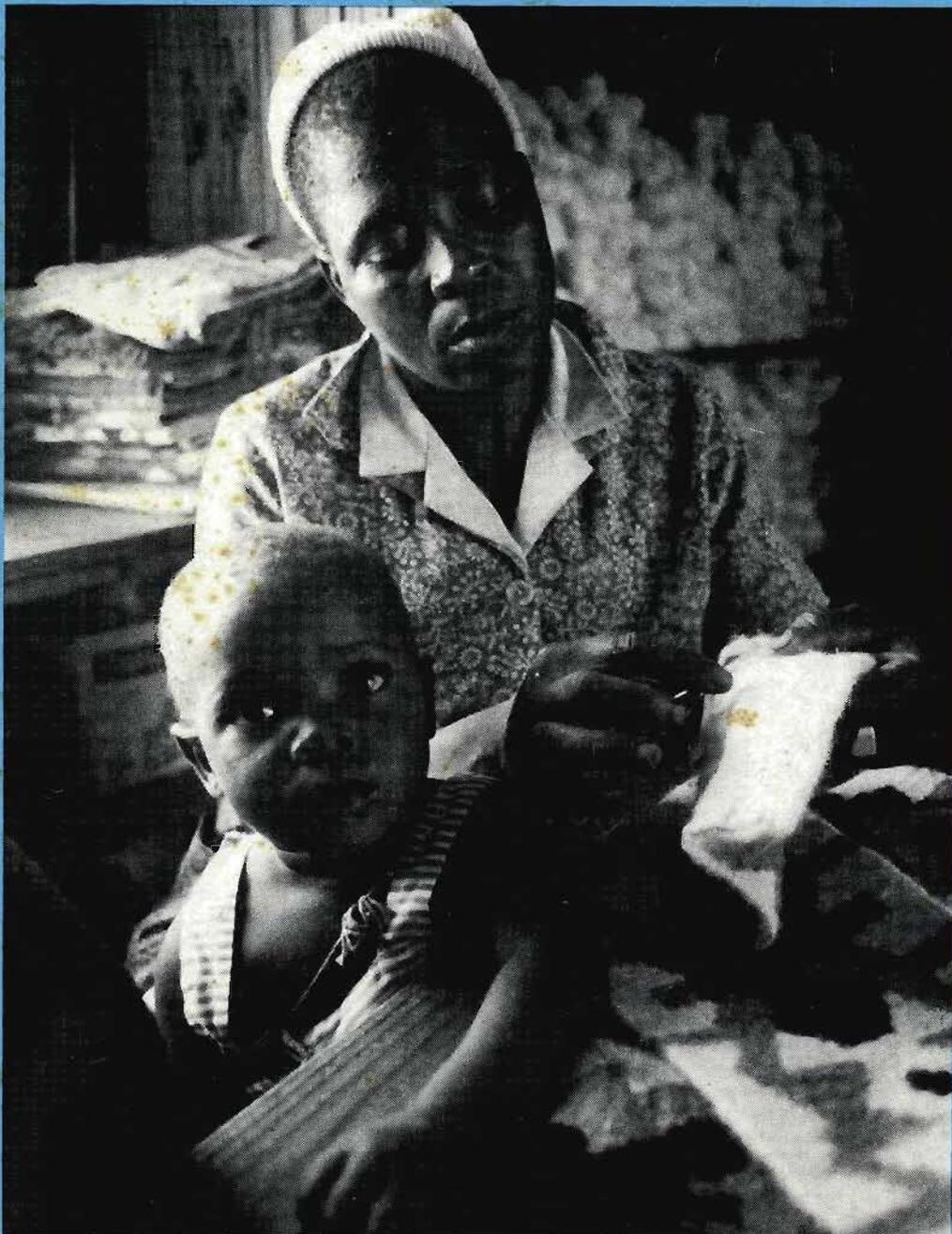
THE TEST by NJABULO S. NDEBELE

## POETRY:

DIKOBE MARTINS, KELWYN SOLE, D.P. PARENZEE

## LETTER FROM NDEBELE:

Black poetry is the life-sustaining writing of a fighting people.



# NEW BOOKS FROM RAVAN



## TOWN AND COUNTRYSIDE IN THE TRANSSVAAL Capitalist Penetration and Popular Response ed. Belinda Bozzoli

In this, the second published collection of papers, some key innovations in academic research are explored. The papers contained here represent a general attempt 'to develop a history which, far from being either boring or propagandistic, can be translated readily into other idioms and media' and which can 'resonate with the lives of ordinary people'. With its geographical focus on the Transvaal, the volume explores urban and rural conflicts, cultures, and complexities; and examines the historical experiences of men, women workers, peasants, share-croppers, slaves, slum and township-dwellers and many other groups, placing them systematically in the context of the development both of the region, and of capitalist South Africa as a whole.

R19.95

## THE LAND BELONGS TO US The Pedi Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Transvaal by Peter Delius

Eighteen seventy-nine was a crucial year in South African history. The Zulu Kingdom and the Pedi polity, two vital obstacles to colonial control, were bludgeoned into submission by British-led armies. The events involved in the rise and destruction of Zulu power have inspired a rich literature. The history of the Pedi, by contrast, is much less well known — despite the contemporary view that among Transvaal Africans the Pedi paramount Sekhukhune 'enjoyed a fame as a chief of dignity and importance hardly inferior to the fame of Cetshwayo among the Zulus.' This account focuses on the history of the Pedi polity. It covers the decades spanning two fundamental refashionings of the relations of power in South Africa: the upheavals of the *difaqane* in the 1820s, and the aggressive British imperialism of the 1870s.

Aside from its intrinsic interest, the history of the Pedi polity intersects with and illuminates a number of wider historical themes. It provides insights into the changing nature and inter-action of pre-colonial African societies, the dynamics of Boer society, missionary endeavour in the Transvaal, migrant labour, South Africa's industrial revolution, and the 'imperial factor'.

New History of Southern Africa Series R13.50

## KINGS, COMMONERS AND CONCESSIONAIRES The Evolution and Dissolution of the Nineteenth-Century Swazi State by Philip Bonner

This is the first full-length study of the political economy of one of the African states which formed in the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century 'Zulu' revolution. The early chapters examine the evolution of the Swazi state up to the mid-nineteenth century, paying particular attention to the 'layering' of society through conquest and differential incorporation, and the simultaneous integration of the state through age regiments and the elaboration of a national ideology centred on the Swazi royalty.

Dr Bonner then sets the Swazi state in the wider context of south-eastern Africa. He examines Swazi relations with the Zulu and shows how the Zulu kingdom was the axis around which regional politics turned. The Boer republics

of the Transvaal were by contrast a much less formidable force, and Dr Bonner goes on to challenge the orthodox view of Boer superiority and dominance over their African neighbours. This situation only changed after the defeat of the Zulu and the Pedi by British armies during the annexation of the Transvaal (1877-81) and the discovery of gold on the Rand in 1886. The final chapters of the book trace the gradual subversion of the Swazi state in this changed environment, analysing the role of the great mining companies and their associated white concessionaires in the demise of Swazi independence.

New History of Southern Africa Series R15 95

## VOLKSKAPITALISME Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934-1948 by Dan O'Meara

Through its analysis of the development of Afrikaner nationalism from the early thirties to the election victory of the Nationalist Party in 1948. *Volkskapitalisme* sets out to refute the commonly held belief that the nationalist policies of Apartheid are in conflict with the colour-blind logic of capitalism. Dan O'Meara's examination of the previously unexplored relationship between the organised emergence of self-consciously Afrikaner capital in the economic movement and the political and ideological forms of development show that, during these years, far from being a monolithic movement of an ethnically mobilised group, Afrikaner nationalism emerged as an alliance of conflicting class forces.

R13.50

## BULLDOZER Staffrider Series No 17 by Achmat Dangor

*Bulldozer* has two voices. The first is personal, and in this voice the poet renders experiences ranging from the intimate and lyrical to such subjects as 'The Grey Ones' (sketches of a squatter colony), 'Summer in Soweto' and 'My Africa'. The second voice is a tough, ribald patois which reworks many of these themes from the different perspective enforced by the change in language. At the intersection of these voices lies a poetic statement which complements the author's previously published prose collection.

R6.50

## CANVAS CITY by Jenny Seed

'Maggie and Paul Farningham set out from Natal with their parents in a canvas-covered wagon to make the family fortunes during the New Rush. Jenny Seed has skilfully woven the hard facts of prospecting into the fabric of her story. The dust, the primitive conditions, scrubbing clothes in meagre buckets of water lugged from a well — all are graphically described. So is the excitement of the first find of a small diamond on the Farningham claim.

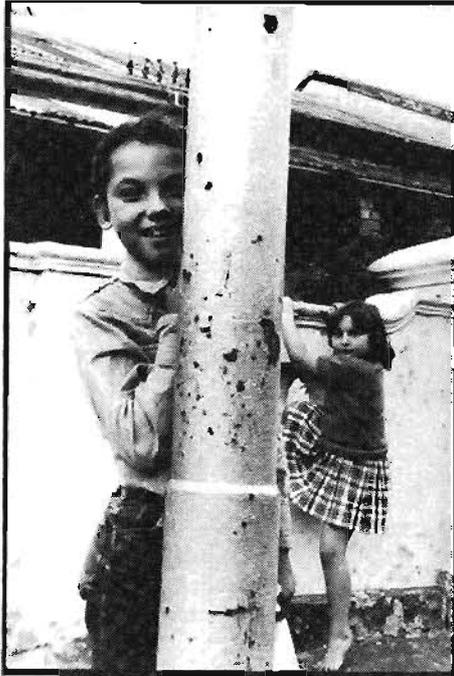
This book has three levels. Educationally Canvas City is excellent reading as Jenny Seed has painted an accurate picture of the early days in Kimberley. In addition to the excitement of the 'cops and robbers' side of the tale, the effects of despair on the children's parents provides and introduction to adult emotions. Recommended for children from eight to 12 years old.'

— *Rosebank/Killarney Gazette*, Rose Chinery.

R7.95

Other books in the New History of Southern Africa series: *The House of Phalo* (J B Peirce), *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom* (Jeff Guy), *The Political Economy of Pondoland* (William Beinart), *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana* (Kevin Shillington).

# Contents



◀ PICS BY GIDEON MENDEL ▲

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 3

1983

## STORIES

- The Night of the Long Knives by Bheki Maseko ..... 2  
 Jericho Again by Ahmed Essop ..... 7  
 Running Away by Steve Jacobs ..... 11  
 Skin Deep by Jean Gray ..... 16  
 The Love Beads by Jayapraga Reddy ..... 22  
 Night Shift by Solomon Martins ..... 27  
 The Monkeys by Francis Bebey ..... 31  
 The Test by Njabulo S Ndebele ..... 34

## POETRY

- Keith Gottschalk, Steve Jacobs, Maori Anderson ..... 6  
 Dikobe Martins ..... 10  
 Kelwyn Sole ..... 14  
 D P Parenzee ..... 26, 41  
 Sam Mtamba ..... 30  
 Karen Press ..... 45

## GALLERY/GRAPHICS

- Mzwakhe ..... 2, 5, 7, 11, 22, 34  
 Bongive ..... 15  
 Percy Sedumedi ..... 16, 27  
 Meg Jordi ..... 31

## FEATURES

### ART AND SOCIETY

- Letter from Nimrod Ndebele ..... 42  
 Letter from Njabulo S Ndebele ..... 44

### BOOK REVIEWS

- by Tyrone August ..... 46, 47  
 by Marguerite Poland ..... 48

## PHOTOGRAPHS

- Jimi Matthews ..... 21, 24, 25  
 Cedric Nunn ..... 42



## SORRY

This is a member of TOU, not Afrika, as we incorrectly stated in the last issue of *Staffrider*. Our apologies, and best wishes, to both groups.

Editor: Chris van Wyk

Front cover photograph: Paul Weinberg

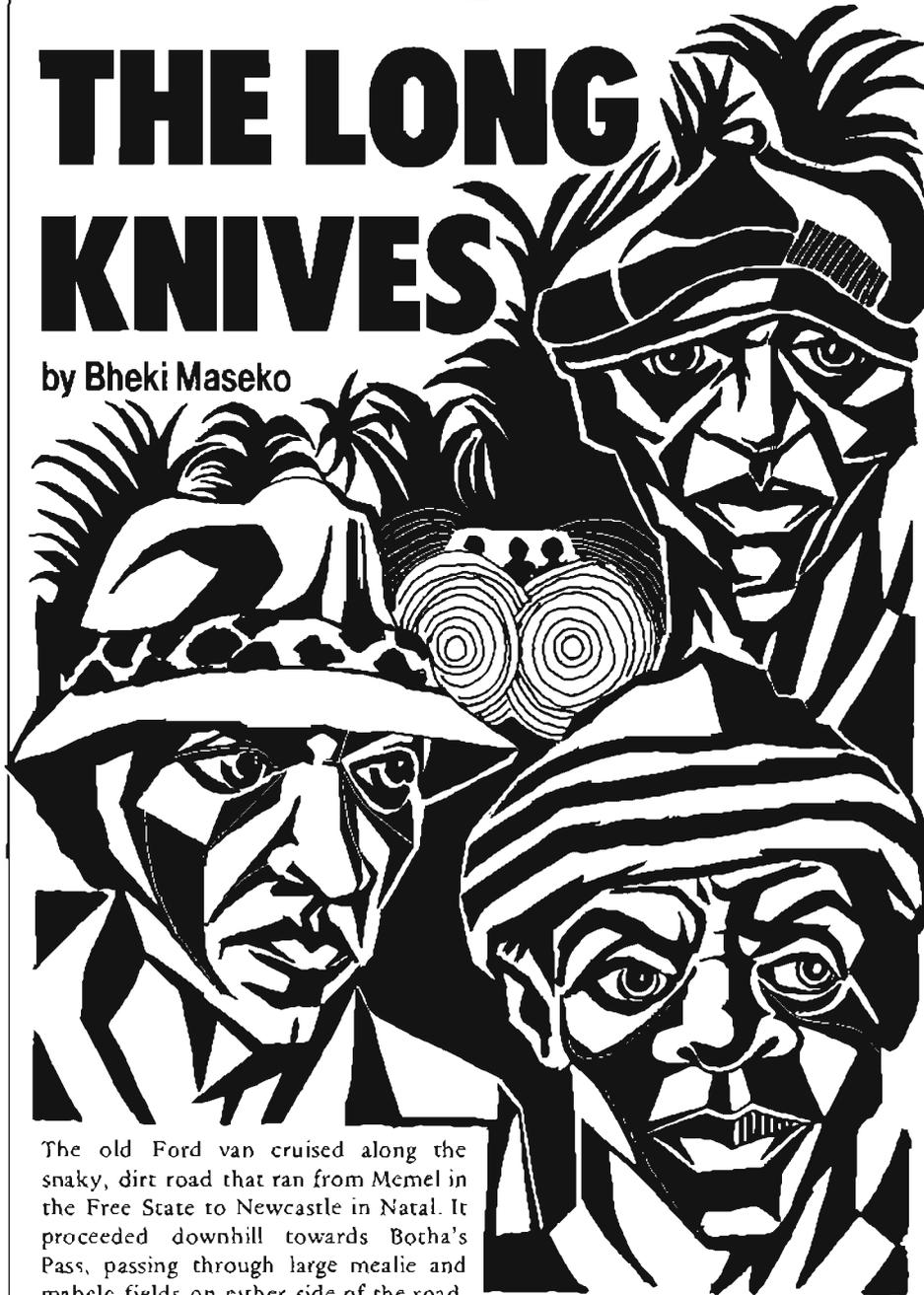
Back cover graphics: Bongive

*Staffrider* magazine is published by Ravan Press, P.O.Box 31134, Braamfontein 2017, South Africa. (Street Address: 23 O'Reilly Road, Berea.) Copyright is held by the individual contributors of all material, including all graphic material, published in the magazine. Anyone wishing to reproduce material from the magazine in any form should approach the individual contributors c/o the publishers.

This issue was printed by Blackshaws (Pty) Ltd., Cape Town. Layout and Reproduction by The Graphic Equalizer.

# THE NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES

by Bheki Maseko



The old Ford van cruised along the snaky, dirt road that ran from Memel in the Free State to Newcastle in Natal. It proceeded downhill towards Botha's Pass, passing through large mealie and mabele fields on either side of the road.

The headlamps picked out a cyclist further on. Another victim, thought Slang, a beefy, bearded, tall, hard-breathing boer. He made jerky movements which were familiar to Guduza and Dambuza seated in the back.

Having switched off the lights, Slang listened to the screams of the victim pleading for mercy. If the victim knew Dambuza, he wouldn't bother crying his head off.

Before the van came to a halt, the two men, bush knives in their hands, alighted. The cyclist saw the bush knives, abandoned his bicycle and ran for dear life. But he was no match for the swift, tireless Dambuza.

Illustrated by Mzwakhe

Having switched off the lights, Slang listened to the screams of the victim pleading for mercy. If the victim knew Dambuza, he wouldn't bother crying his head off.

The man's screams were short-lived. His resistance against Dambuza and Guduza was futile. To Dambuza, butchering a man was like slaughtering a goat.

Slang disliked the job but conditions compelled him to take it. It was the brainchild of that mastermind Guduza. He had suggested the plan after they had both served a five-year jail sentence for smuggling dagga. They found it impossible to continue their dagga racket after their release because

the police had eliminated all their sources.

He had provided the van and Guduza brought Dambuza who was the tough guy in the game. Guduza had an abundance of markets deep in Natal where there were many witchdoctors.

The bangs on the canopy told Slang to drive on. The beheading was over.

The van proceeded slowly as Slang's eyes scanned the place for more victims. The well tended fields brought memories to Slang. When his father managed their farm during his young days, it was very prosperous. Today it lay in waste that brought a feeling of desolation to his heart.

His childhood was not a bed of roses, he recalled, because of his mother's uncooperativeness. 'Paul,' she used to say to his father, 'Jan (Slang) spends too much time with these natives. He must go to Oom Hennie's farm to play with Henk and Piet during the holidays.' Slang's father, a quiet hardworking man who never said much would only give his son a sympathetic stare.

Days were very lonely at Oom Hennie's. He used to dream of the day he would go back home to play with Vusi, the son of a man who worked on their farm even although his mother had forbidden it.

Henk and Piet used to complain that he was playing rough. 'Don't hit them too hard, Jan,' Tant Merrie would say. Her interference in their play annoyed him very much.

They even resigned from their jobs to have more time to smuggle dagga. Before long they were arrested and sentenced to six months each, and suspended sentences.

One morning, while they were playing hide and seek, he collided with Piet who fell unconscious. He ran home — which was a good twenty miles away. He played with Vusi the whole of that day. The hiding he received from his mother for returning home in the afternoon is an experience that will stick in his memory as long as he lives.

He was seventeen when he went to Newcastle where he worked as a barman — he was nicknamed Slang. He easily made friends with the cunning Guduza who was a waiter. Guduza introduced him to an easy way of making money. They even resigned from their jobs to have more time to smuggle dagga. Before long they were arrested and sentenced to six months each, and suspended sentences.

Soon after their release Slang went back home where he found that his

father had passed away the previous day, and his mother's ill health was deteriorating. He thought at least his father's death was a breakaway from his uncompromising mother. He left soon after his father's burial because of his mother's endless complaints.

Back in Newcastle he joined Guduza who was back in the racket. On their way from Vryheid they were found in possession of six bags of dagga and got away with five-year sentences. When he finished his sentence, he found that his mother had long since passed away

---

**Slang thought the man crazy to think that human flesh could heal and bring fortune. Guduza had told him that the man was a witchdoctor who used this human flesh to heal and help any person who wanted to be rich.**

---

Everything was left in the care of Oom Hennie who bluntly told him he was old enough to look after himself. He never heard from Oom Hennie since. Nor his two cousins.

It was in the early hours of the morning and the van was heading for Slang's farm in the Free State. Guduza and Dambuza were now seated in the front — Dambuza by the window as always, his hands deep in his black coat pockets with which he never parted.

'We will have to try somewhere else before the police pounce on us,' said Slang.

'Ja,' observed Guduza. 'I've been giving it a thought for quite a long time. There's a friend of mine in Vrystaat not far from your place. His wife left him because he spends most of the time in jail. He is a very money-conscious person and I think it will be easy to convince him.'

'Do you want him to join us?' asked Slang.

'Sorry, I forgot to mention my plan. My friend's house is by the path that goes to and from Natal and he receives guests twice or thrice a week. If he joins us it will sure save us time and money.'

'Good idea, boy,' said Slang. 'I know you always have ideas. It just depends whether your friend agrees or not.'

'I wish he does,' said Slang eyeing the gloomy Dambuza from the corner of his eye.

Early next morning the three drove out to Hlathikhulu which was deep in Natal. They met their customer in an isolated forest where the planning took place. The customer — a tall thin old man — reminded Slang of a crook in a novel he once read.

Slang thought the man crazy to think that human flesh could heal and bring fortune. Guduza had told him that the

man was a witchdoctor who used this human flesh to heal and help any person who wanted to be rich.

Mehl'emamba the witchdoctor had warned Guduza never to tell anyone where he resided. 'Never tell anyone, not even your close friend,' he warned, eyeing Guduza with squinted eyes that reminded him of a mamba. No wonder he was called Mehl'emamba.

As soon as the witchdoctor disappeared into the thick forest, they shared the money as they always did. Dambuza, as always, stared at Slang's bigger share comparing it with his own before he pushed it into his hip pocket.

'Some of this goes to petrol and car repairs,' Slang reminded them. But the 'Big Dummy', Dambuza turned and looked out of the window.

Before nightfall they were back at Slang's farm. Guduza left quickly to see his friend Molo. Presently he came back and told them that he had agreed, although it had taken him a little persuasion and a bribe.

---

**'They give these heads to ghosts who promise to give them money in return,' said a young man who was one of the slaughterers. 'But it is said that these ghosts never give them money but demand more heads, as a result they go on killing people.'**

---

People came from as far as the Free State to mourn. The news that another person had fallen victim to the beheaders spread like wild fire.

In one of the thatched roof mud huts, cloaked in blankets, sat MaMkhwanazi the mother of the dead man. Her dry eyes were red from crying. Mourners came to pour their condolences, singing songs before expressing their sympathy.

'Siphiwe was found along the main road early yesterday morning with his head hacked off,' said the bereaved family's representative who was seated next to MaMkhwanazi. 'And just when Thembisile is to get married.'

'It's always the case, bakithi. The wedding ceremony goes hand in hand with ill fortune,' said the greying Mthembu sadly shaking his head among the mourners. 'Last week it was the Nkosis and today it's the Sithebes. It is a very bitter experience to bury a mutilated corpse. One wonders what the killers do with the heads.'

Outside by the kraal lay a slaughtered beast. Men were busy dividing the carcass according to the custom. Having expressed his condolences, Mthembu joined the slaughtering party.

'They give these heads to ghosts who promise to give them money in return,' said a young man who was one of the slaughterers. 'But it is said that these

ghosts never give them money but demand more heads, as a result they go on killing people.'

'They give them to who?' asked Mthembu.

'To ghosts, everybody knows that,' affirmed the young man.

'Does that make sense to you?' Mthembu asked.

'It does make sense because that's what everybody knows,' insisted Themba, the young man.

'That's what we believe because that's what everybody says,' intervened Nyambose who was in the same age group as Mthembu. 'Tell us what they do with them if you think what people say is unfounded.'

'To me it doesn't make sense that transactions can take place between people and ghosts. I don't think there's any physical contact between the living and the dead. If you sit down and think carefully you will certainly come to the conclusion that there is no truth in the whole story,' observed Mthembu, staring at Nyambose.

'People have been beheaded in the Free State these last few months, now it is happening right here in Botha's Pass. Three people we know have been hacked this month. Everyone knows that the heads are given to the ghosts. If you think otherwise, tell us what you think,' insisted Nyambose looking around and smiling confidently.

'Truly speaking, I don't know what they do with the heads, but there's something else they do with them. They only say this to mislead people.'

Meanwhile people flocked from all over Botha's Pass and the Free State to the burial that was to take place in the afternoon.

Four women, one carrying a child, went through a path lined by tall mealie stalks that ran for miles on end. The Drakensberg escarpment at a distance, covered by mabele fields, looked like a big brown blanket.

Just over the Drakensberg was the Free State.

'I feel sorry for MaMkhwanazi to lose her son three months before Thembisile's wedding,' said MaYika as the women plodded uphill. 'It's even worse because they buried a headless corpse.'

'Don't mention that,' said MaBhengu. 'It makes me feel cold. We must get a place to sleep before it gets dark, lest we fall victim to the same fate.'

'We are safe here. It only happens on the main road where they can easily load you onto the van,' commented MaMbokazi as she heaved the child up and adjusted the carrying skin.

'Don't say that!' admonished MaNdlovu. 'People are avoiding the

main road these days. You'll never know what the killers are planning next. We must find a place to sleep before it's too late.'

'You can go in there,' said the man pointing at one of the huts. 'I'll go and fetch my wife. She's gone to see her ailing mother just behind that hillock.' The women expressed their sympathy.

'All right, let's go over the Drakensberg, we will find a place in the Free State and proceed tomorrow morning,' said MaBhengu. We will gather papyrus during the day and leave the next morning so that we can travel during the day.'

'Cut this topic out, it makes me scared,' intervened MaNdllovu walking faster. 'But why did we leave the papyrus in Botha's Pass and go all the way to the Free State?'

'You know very well the best papyrus grows on the banks of the Igwa River,' MaBhengu pointed out. 'We must weave the best handicrafts for MaMkhwanazi's in-laws. And you know we always go there when we have to weave for a wedding.'

The women had crossed the Drakensberg and the sun was a crimson ball that hung over the mountains at a distance. They decided to cross over to one of the houses along the path.

'Greetings baba,' said the women in a chorus to a middle-aged man who was seated on a papyrus mat by one of the huts.

'Greetings my sisters,' answered the man after a long silence.

The women related the purpose of their journey and asked for a place to sleep.

'You can go in there,' said the man pointing at one of the huts. 'I'll go and fetch my wife. She's gone to see her ailing mother just behind that hillock.' The women expressed their sympathy.

As soon as the women entered the dimly lit hut, the baby, which had been sleeping, woke up and cried, fretting and wriggling as if it wanted to jump out of the carrying skin.

Slang and Guduza were smoking grass by the kraal and Dambuza was grinding his thoughts a few metres away when Moloji came to inform them of the presence of his guests.

'Four women and a child!' recited Slang and Guduza.

Mehl'emamba desperately wanted a baby and the price was high. This was

the right time to quit, thought Slang, after pulling the job. Then go to Rhodesia to start a new life.

'There are four women and we are four, so each will get rid of one woman,' said Dambuza from where he was sitting.

Slang felt as if Dambuza had slapped him. The big dummy was offering him a bush knife to slaughter a woman. It hadn't occurred to him that today there was no escape, there was no hiding behind the steering wheel and listening to the screams of the victims. Today he must participate — he must take a life. It was the first time Dambuza said something concerning the racket.

'Let's go gentlemen, time is running out,' urged Moloji looking at Guduza. Dambuza was already swinging his bush knife, ready for action. The four headed for Moloji's place, all armed except Moloji.

As soon as the women entered the dimly lit hut, the baby, which had been sleeping, woke up and cried, fretting and wriggling as if it wanted to jump out of the carrying skin.

MaMbokazi went out and stood in the moonlit courtyard. The baby calmed down as soon as she was outside and she rocked it until it fell asleep.

She went back in and not very long afterwards the child started its emotional crying. The woman went out once more and again the child stopped crying. She lulled the baby who quickly fell asleep. She went back in. The child woke up and started his hysterical cry once more. MaMbokazi tried to breast-feed it but the baby refused and continued its wriggling.

'I wonder what's wrong with this child, he doesn't want to stay indoors,' commented MaMbokazi lulling the baby. The child went from one woman to another. It still wriggled and tore at their breasts.

'Children have an instinct for feeling things we cannot see, and react to it by crying,' observed one woman. 'I wonder what's wrong. I don't like the way this child cries.'

MaMbokazi went out once more as the silence reigned in the small hut.

At the far end of the courtyard by the gate, behind an old cart, stood sheaves of fodder. She decided to go and sit there as the child did not want to stay indoors.

She was busy day-dreaming when at a distance she saw headlamps approaching. They went off and a group of men alighted and came in the direction of the house. One of the voices had a strong Afrikaans accent. They did not see her as they entered the gate and proceeded to the hut where the women were housed. What they carried in

their hands made MaMbokazi go cold. They were armed with bush knives.

The women watched in horror as three men, one white, burst into the room, armed with long knives. It was when Dambuza advanced, his eyes blood red and his thick lips quivering that the women started to scream . . .

Moloji walked in front as he knew the way around. Immediately he came near the hut, he pointed it out to the others. They just stood there as if no one wanted to go in first, listening to the women chatting in low tones. Dambuza was the first to go in, bush knife at the ready.

The women watched in horror as three men, one white, burst into the room, armed with long knives. It was when Dambuza advanced, his eyes blood red and his thick lips quivering that the women started to scream, shrinking against the mud wall. MaNdllovu, who was face to face with Dambuza, clasped her hands. Pleading, her lips moved but no words came out. Her pleas were cut short when he pinned her against the mud wall.

'Guduza, child of my brother, spare my life,' were the words from MaBhengu, who was looking beseechingly at Guduza, her hands held together in a praying form.

Guduza stood there staring stupidly at his aunt kneeling before him, pleading for mercy. The last person he had expected to see in this part of the country. The knife slipped from his sweaty hand and fell to the floor with a clink.

He darted out of the hut and the bewildered MaBhengu followed him. She did not reach the door — for Dambuza pierced his knife in her flank and she fell like an axed pole.

'Baas asseblief!' was all MaYika could say. The next second she was as silent as a carcass.

'Where's the woman with the child?' asked Moloji looking around.

'We don't know, you told us there were four women and a child, now where's the other woman?' asked Slang.

'Maybe she's somewhere around,' said Moloji stumbling out of the room towards the other huts.

A few seconds after the men had entered the hut, there were terrible screams. MaMbokazi could clearly hear the voice of MaBhengu begging for mercy from Guduza — it was chaos.

She did not wait for bad luck. She dashed out of the gate, down the

narrow path towards the mealie fields. She fell into ditches, bumped against objects until she was in the field where she proceeded deeper in, falling from time to time. She could still hear the voices of her friends as she stumbled with the child hanging loosely behind.

She had run for a long time when she fell into a ditch, and just lay there. She just could not proceed.

The three men searched the whole yard to no avail. They took the corpses and dumped them in the back of the van. Guduza sat in the front, staring blankly ahead.

'Guduza,' called Slang in a worried voice. 'The woman with the child has vanished. We've got to find her — we've got to find her tonight. Otherwise we are sunk.'

'She must have gone out this way,' observed Moloï pointing at the gate. 'It is the only way out of the courtyard, she must be somewhere in the fields. Let's go get her before she reaches Baas Henry's house.'

Guduza just sat there inattentive to the discussions.

'Let's go before it's too late Guduza,' said Slang opening the car door for him. Guduza stepped out slowly like a very sick person. He followed the men to the mealie fields, scanning the place.

**MaMbokazi lay there listening to the sound of maize stalks being pushed aside to pave the way. It was the same voices she had heard while she was seated by the gate. They were coming in her direction.**

He could still hear the voice of his father's sister begging for mercy before him. He had last seen her ten years ago in Durban where she stayed with his father. This was after ten years in Newcastle without going home, and that was the last time he went home. He had never expected any person he knew in this part of the country.

Dambuzza plodded on as if all he wanted was the woman. Slang, wearing a worried facial expression, looked warily around. He saw his plans drowning in front of him. Moloï regretted having accepted Guduza's proposal. 'I should have told him to go to hell,' he growled.

MaMbokazi lay there listening to the sound of maize stalks being pushed aside to pave the way. It was the same voices she had heard while she was seated by the gate. They were coming in her direction.

She pulled closer the soft warm body of her child who was lying next to her.



The little one had lain next to her when she fell. She wanted to feel its body. Maybe she was feeling its warmth for the last time. Here were the lions tracking them down — wanting their lives.

She could clearly see the figures through the mealie stalks, bush knives hanging loosely in their hands. They were looking carefully around, seeking no one else — but her and the baby. To butcher them.

'Let's go and check the courtyard again,' called the white man stopping. 'She can't have gone so far. I think we have left her somewhere in the courtyard. She must be hiding somewhere there.'

But they just stood there. As if they had been commanded to stop, looking suspiciously around.

'Let's go back, she's certainly in the courtyard,' Slang repeated.

The others followed suit but Dambuzza remained, still looking around. MaMbokazi lay there watching the giant figure standing there in the moonlit field, refusing to spare their lives. She wished he could listen to the demands of the 'baas'.

**She wondered what Maduna, her husband, was doing at home. Maybe he was sitting by the fireside, smoking his paper rolled tobacco, unaware of the predicament they were in.**

She brought the baby even closer. Their lives, she felt were in its hands. It was up to the child to stay mum and save them from these vultures hovering over their heads. If only it could be wise enough and realise the danger they were in. She wished the baby was

asleep. But she knew very well it was wide awake — after falling into ditches and bumping against objects, running away from death.

If only the ancestors could flex their powerful muscles and give the child strength to stay quiet until that man left. Then it could cry and cry and cry. She would never stop it. The child would deserve it then — but not now.

The 'baas' called to Dambuzza to come. 'Time is running out.' To the woman's relief he obeyed and followed the others, looking back from time to time.

'Guduza, spare my life.' She could feel the begging voice of MaBhengu touching the pit of her stomach. One time MaBhengu had told her something about Guduza, but she could not recall what it was.

She wondered what Maduna, her husband, was doing at home. Maybe he was sitting by the fireside, smoking his paper rolled tobacco, unaware of the predicament they were in.

The moon looked peaceful and far away. As if staring — refraining from the world that has no mercy, or security. A world where people kill their own kind — cause wars that involve millions — just to retain a position, regain a lost prestige, or wealth that has turned people into wild creatures.

In the early hours of the morning she fell asleep.

The men went back to Moloi's place to search once more — to no avail. Slang wished Moloi had erred, but he knew he wouldn't have made a mistake about the baby. Guduza stood by the gate with a far-away look. Dambuza thought they had left the woman behind. But because they thought otherwise, it was up to them. Moloi still regretted having accepted Guduza's proposal. If his wife MaMokoena were here, he wouldn't have been in this mess. He wished it was a bad dream.

'Let's go to my place and prepare for the trip to Hlathikhulu tomorrow afternoon.' It was Slang's tired voice as he went towards the van where Guduza was sitting staring blankly ahead.

'You get along, I'll follow you. I just want to fix some of my things,' said Moloi going towards the huts. He listened to the engine burst into life, and the van drove off. He came out and watched the tail lights until they disappeared. He ran out of the gate towards his neighbour Masike's house. 'I'm going to tell Baas Henry first thing tomorrow morning. I'm going to ask Masike to accompany me. I am going to tell him everything!' He swore under his breath.

The noise of the crying child and a

tractor droning at a distance woke MaMbokazi. It was daylight and her whole body ached.

With an effort she stood up and looked in the direction of the sound of the tractor which seemed to be approaching.

'What are you doing here, mama?' called a voice behind her. She jumped and turned, coming face to face with a man. 'O Nkulunkulu wami!' was all she managed to say and collapsed.

Mngomezulu came closer and watched with awe the distraught face of the woman. He picked up the crying child who had fallen next to the woman and embraced it, undecided as to what to do.

**'Don't be scared mama, you are safe here,' reassured Ma Smith still smiling. This time she relaxed a little.**

He made up his mind and went with the child to inform Mrs Smith, who quickly organised farm workers to bring the woman to her dining room. She embraced the baby, and bottle fed it as she smiled happily into its sleepy face, impressed by the plump ebony face that reminded her of well polished mahogany.

It took a long time to revive the woman lying on a mat next to Mrs Smith.

'Where's my child?' was her first question when she regained consciousness. Ma Smith, as she was called by the farm labourers, handed over the baby and gave the woman an assuring smile. The woman grabbed the baby and embraced it as if she was afraid someone was going to take it away from her. As if it was the only thing that mattered in the world. Her frightened eyes surveyed the room suspiciously.

'Don't be scared, mama, you are safe here,' reassured Ma Smith still smiling. This time she relaxed a little.

A few minutes later everyone in the room, including Mr Smith, listened intently to the woman relating her plight.

There was a crunch of gravel outside, the footsteps were coming towards the house. MaMbokazi stopped short, her eyes fixed anxiously on the door. Then a knock.

Silence reigned as Mngomezulu opened the door. 'Oh, it's you Masike and Moloi,' he said, opening the door wider.

Their eyes locked — Moloi and MaMbokazi. She held her child tighter, and sailed backwards along the floor until she was well behind Ma Smith, her eyes never leaving Moloi.

'Kill me but spare my child,' was all she could say.

## POETRY

## Keith Gottschalk, Steve Jacobs, Maori Anderson

### COMMUNISTS IN JAIL

'... Darkness falls.  
The trumpets of the Roman eagle scream.'

— Akhmatova

*for Jeremy Cronin and other friends*

the animal has eaten;  
chewed these Reds, bared and boiled,  
cracked them, licked occasional marrow.

satiated, stenching  
it drops them.

now steel fangs and concrete flanks  
searching for new young flesh . . .

Keith Gottschalk

### COLOURS

Gold is wrenched  
Blackly from a torrid earth;  
I stray lamely  
Down white hospital halls,  
Search for eyes and tongues  
To speak of freedom.  
And Eternal Tables  
Where white men  
Lay you out.

Steve Jacobs

### THE SOLITARY MAN

*for Neil Aggett, African Food and Canning Workers' Union,  
and others*

His jailers shifted uneasily:

'He was found hanged.  
He fell out of a window  
fell down the stairs  
fell in the shower  
fell on a bar of soap . . .

His friends knew. They said:  
'fallen in action.'

Keith Gottschalk

### A WHITE LIBERAL IN SOUTH AFRICA

it was near the university

a black woman stumbled towards me, wailing quite loudly —  
a sound so sad that I became afraid

helplessly, I asked if anything was wrong

from blind eyes, snail trails of tears led to her chin  
'My baby has just died' she glared  
then she turned and walked away

Maori Anderson

# JERICHO AGAIN

by  
Ahmed  
Essop



*And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city. (Joshua 6:21)*

The official drove in his car along Delarey Street in Pageview. The suburb was already beginning to look derelict and ruinous as here and there houses lay crushed into rubble by bulldozers that had stormed in in the wake of people leaving. He turned his car into Fourteenth Street. On both sides stretched a seemingly endless array of

Illustrated by Mzwakhe

... Fordsburg's Oriental Plaza — a large, modern, vulgar building its only pretension to oriental splendour a small copper dome on a brick tower beside a brick fountain where a copper foil peacock shivered in eternal misery under splashing water.

pillars. Although the shops and the apartments above were yet intact, the street was deserted. Besides Khalid and his wife Houda everyone in the street had left to take up residence in government-planned distant Lenasia, and the shopkeepers had moved to their new premises in nearby Fordsburg's Oriental Plaza — a large, modern, vulgar building, its only pretension to oriental splendour a small copper dome on a brick tower beside a brick fountain where a copper foil peacock shivered in eternal misery under splashing water.

The official parked his car in front of a three-storey building and entered a dark passage that led into a yard where he climbed a steel stair-case to the upper floor. He walked along a polished corridor and knocked at a door the upper half of which was of translucent azure glass ornamented at its heart with a stained-glass purple lotus. Khalid opened the door.

'Good day,' the official said. 'I have the final notice for you from the Department of Replanning. Please sign for it.'

Khalid signed, took the notice, and the official left.

Although she supported her husband in his defiance, she was filled with natural domestic anxiety. They needed a home; they had a life to live.

Khalid was sixty years old, though his strongly-built body and handsome face graced with silver-lined brown hair gave him the appearance of a much younger man. He had been a member of the Orient Front before its banning and the proscription of its officials. He had been twice to jail during passive resistance campaigns, and had been in the forefront of those who had opposed the forced removal of people from Pageview. All his life he had lived there — in fact his parents had lived there during Gandhi's time, as traders. His own shop, now closed, on the ground floor of the building he lived in, had once been laden with exotic haberdashery, sandals, carved tables, brass ornaments, hookahs, kaftans. It had been patronised by all those who valued craftsmanship in an age of plastics.

The opposition to the destruction of

the suburb had taken various forms. First, residents had held mass meetings where protest resolutions had been taken; then an abortive legal challenge followed; thereafter physical resistance to the removal was offered. But in the face of an implacable will to destruction courage wilted, and as bulldozers paraded in military formation threatening to reduce to rubble buildings that had been constructed at the turn of the century, despair set in and the exodus began.

Khalid returned to his lounge where he had been reading Red Oleanders, a Tagore play. His wife, a neat elegant tall woman in a jade tunic, was sitting in an arm-chair, knitting.

'The final notice has come,' Khalid said. 'But there is not much point in reading it. Let them break the place down.'

'Read it,' Houda said. 'Perhaps they may take an ejection order in court first.'

He read the notice and said, 'You are right.'

Houda went on knitting. Although she supported her husband in his defiance, she was filled with natural domestic anxiety. They needed a home; they had a life to live.

'What shall we do when we are in the street?' she asked, stopping her knitting for a moment to look at her husband.

'Don't worry, let the time come,' he said. 'There are more serious things that can happen to one than losing a home and living in the street.'

Many of the homes had been pulverized, but here and there some still stood as people were living there until their houses were ready in Lenasia.

Houda went on with her knitting. Her husband saw events with such a comprehensive inclusive vision — were there not people all over the Third World gripped by diseases and starvation? others involved in personal tragedies? others in fatal accidents? others crushed in the maelstrom of civil violence and national wars? — that losing one's livelihood or home was a comparatively minute inconvenience.

In the evening Khalid told his wife that he was going for a walk and he went down the stairs to the street. Only the street lights were on. Once the street had been a blaze of colour, neon signs proclaiming the names of shops: Habib's Sari Boutique, Surtee's Fashion House, Bulbul's Auction Mart, Khan's Outfitters, and windows displaying floral silks, drapery on dummy mannequins, falls of curtaining material, phalanxes of shoes. But beyond the materialistic glamour, the street had served as playground, agora and academy. Children

had played games in the evening and adults had gathered in the shop-front colonnades to listen to merchants, politicians, pundits, students, lawyers, medics, sportsmen and teachers. Khalid, in a mood of melancholy nostalgia, walked down towards Delarey Street where once little cafés had been bright oases of sociality, offering for sale ice-cold fruit-flavoured drinks, chocolates, cakes and glazed oriental delicacies. Now the lights were out.

He turned into Fifteenth Street and walked up. Many of the homes had been pulverized, but here and there some still stood as people were living there until their houses were ready in Lenasia. Once it had been a street where every house shared a common wall with another, yet had its distinctive architectural beauty and character. Now those that remained stood shadowy and forlorn under the street lights, the curtain-subdued, lighted windows enhancing the pervasive gloom. As he walked along the deserted street he realised that with the destruction of the homes a treasury of human relationships that had constituted the living tissue of communal existence had been devastated: joy in marriages and births, sharing

When Khalid reached the lighted mosque he went into the yard and sat down on a bench. And here for a while he reflected upon the origin and nature of the impulse that had led to the decision to flatten the suburb.

of food, clothes and shelter, sorrow in deaths, sociability in conversation, help in times of need. Then there had been the heart-warming pleasure of existence in a time-hallowed suburb where every brick, finger-stained pillar and wall, creaking window, had become part of the mellow aura of urban definition and familiarity. That sort of life was not possible in government ordained Lenasia where stereotyped houses were separated by concrete walls, hedges, gardens and open spaces, where each family was thrown back upon its sterile individuality.

When Khalid reached the lighted mosque he went into the yard and sat down on a bench. And here for a while he reflected upon the origin and nature of the impulse that had led to the decision to flatten the suburb. Was it merely the ideology of racial separation that had determined the fiat? or had the consuming uncontrollable greed of the patrician whites, gaining momentum in an age of rabid materialism and commercialism, become an inalienable part of their collective psyche, driving them to appropriate whatever little others possessed? or was it the act of a

people who, because of centuries of domination, had degenerated to the level of philistines? or was it part of the ethos of violence characteristic of Europe and America?

Khalid's and Houda's protest gained wide publicity. Many people came to Fourteenth Street and it began to look like the mart it had once been, except that protest banners were tied to pillars instead of announcements of end-of-season sales. Everyone expressed their solidarity. Even some of the whites who lived across Delarey Street came over to sympathise.

After two weeks the Department of Replanning took action against Khalid and his wife in court. An ejection order was granted and the Department sent two officials and five assistants to remove their household goods from the building. In anticipation of the action many people had gathered in the street. Newspaper reporters and photographers were also present. Khalid was asked several questions

'What do you propose to do now?'

'I intend to stay on the pavement.'

'Where will you sleep?'

'Here.'

'For how long?'

'As long as possible.'

'Where do you intend to go afterwards?'

'My wife and I have not decided.'

'Will you go to Lenasia?'

'No.'

Khalid's and Houda's protest gained wide publicity. Many people came to Fourteenth Street and it began to look like the mart it had once been, except that protest banners were tied to pillars instead of announcements of end-of-season sales. Everyone expressed their solidarity. Even some of the whites who lived across Delarey Street came over to sympathise.

The Department of Replanning, angered by the bad publicity they were receiving, decided to take legal action. Khalid and Houda were charged for residing illegally in an area reserved for whites. The action immediately led to the formation of a defence committee to assist the couple. The suit was a complex one as whites were not in actual occupation of the area and there seemed to be no statute of parliament relating to such a contingency. Legal argument dragged on and the matter was postponed.

The Department then decided that they were not going to allow one man and his wife to defy them. Though Fourteenth Street, according to plans, was to be demolished at a later stage, they decided to act at once. They sent

in the demolishers to tear down the building in which Khalid and Houda lived. They watched its destruction.

The demolishers went about their task with gusto: bulldozers roared in fury; drills screeched and bit into concrete; labourers shouted amid falling walls and dust, wielding terrible sledgehammers; trucks roared.

**'I sometimes think,' Arthur said, 'it is best not to have a home or anything. Then there is nothing for anyone to break or take away.'**

When, at the end of the day, the last truck-load of rubble was being carried away, a purple reflection flared in Khalid's vision. 'Look! Look!' he said to his wife, taking her hand. 'The purple lotus!' For an instant the setting sun seemed to concentrate all its fire into the stained-glass bloom, infusing it with gem-like splendour. The truck turned and was gone and for a while darkness held Khalid's eyes. His wife felt his hand tremble and heard a soft cry of anguish. For the first time she came to experience that her husband's stoic spirit was not impregnable. For Khalid, the shattered glass lotus had become in that instant emblematically related to a flaw within man, to a primordial unexpurgated urge and will

towards annihilation.

Then Arthur the tramp — an unkempt figure with a short blond beard and azure eyes — came shuffling along the pavement and when he saw Khalid and Houda, stopped.

'I am sorry,' he said.

He was a quiet self-effacing old man, who had been a familiar figure for as long as anyone could remember, forming part of the pillars and pavement before him, yet living on the periphery of people's lives, without a past or a future, surviving on charity, a solitary, haunting alleys joining streets, or standing in an archway, his face warped by liquor.

Khalid thanked him for commiserating.

'I sometimes think,' Arthur said, 'it is best not to have a home or anything. Then there is nothing for anyone to break or take away.'

'Perhaps you are right,' Khalid said.

Arthur looked at husband and wife for a while without saying a word, and then waving a hand walked away. He went up to the end of the street and stood there, looking at them.

After two days, the Replanning authorities, infuriated by Khalid's and Houda's protest by continuing to live on the pavement, closed both ends of the street, saying it was dangerous for

people to enter as demolishers were going into action. Soon an army of demolishers entered and attacked the buildings.

One night as Khalid and Houda slept on the pavement, several masked men came and seized them, while others overturned all their household goods, opened their wardrobes and slashed their clothing with knives. As Khalid struggled with two of the men he heard shouts from the opposite pavement. The masked men, not expecting anyone else to be present, became frightened and fled. Neither Khalid nor Houda were injured. Then they heard a groan and when they went to look across the street they saw a man lying near a pillar. It was Arthur. He had been knocked over by the fleeing assailants while trying to stop them. Houda lifted his head and gave him some water, but he did not revive. Khalid quickly went to Fifteenth Street, knocked at a door, told them what had happened and telephoned for an ambulance.

Arthur was taken to hospital. He died there the next day.

Two days later, Khalid and Houda shaken and saddened by the death of Arthur, decided to end their protest. They were offered a one-bedroom flat by someone in Fordsburg and they left the ruined suburb forever. ●

## THE DE JAGER-HAUM PUBLISHERS

Offering you 27  
prizes to be won!

Prize winning  
money totals R13,500

### *Literary Prize for African Languages*

Commencing: 1 April 1982  
Final closing date: 31 December 1983

#### GENRE

PROSE: Short Story  
and  
DRAMA: One-act play

#### THE PRIZE

Will be awarded for either the best collection of one-act plays or the best collection of short stories in each language.

First prize: R750  
Second prize: R500  
Third prize: R250

Two return air tickets to Europe will be awarded to the overall winner.

#### SCOPE

The De Jager-Haum literary prize for African Languages is open to all established or new writers in the following languages:

Zulu	Southern Sotho
Xhosa	Tswana
SiSwati	Venda
Southern Ndebele	Tsonga
Northern Sotho	

For more information, brochures on the one-act play and short story, as well as an entry form, write to:

The Editor  
De Jager-Haum Literary Prize  
P.O. Box 629  
Pretoria 0001  
Tel: (012) 323-4091/2/3/4

**HOUR OF DECISION**

Thixo, that sound again  
 at this ungodly hour  
 when even bedbugs are at rest  
**POLICE BOOTS AND FISTS**  
 hammering persistently  
 the devil knows no rest I see  
 his torches cutting up the night  
 with strobe lights  
 what do they want  
 this time  
 their passbook made in Pretoria  
 that carries my name  
 that dirty dog-eared albatross book of my life  
 what do they want  
 this time  
 their permit  
**PERMIT! PERMIT! PERMIT!**  
 Their permit which decides  
 which of their coffins shall receive  
 my work-weary body for the night  
**SO-WHERE-TO, Alexandra, Tembisa**  
 or **SELECTION PARK** cemetery  
 Thixo, that sound again  
 at this ungodly hour  
 when even the bedbugs are at rest  
 what do they want this time  
 perhaps they are plagued by charity  
 blessed is he who gives than receives  
 Thixo we have been receiving for a long time  
 the charity of search warrants  
 the charity of detention and banning orders  
 Thixo, the **TERROR ACT** too  
 Section Six  
 Section Ten  
 Sections, Sections, Sections  
 Thixo the choice of charity has been wide  
 Thixo, that sound again  
 at this ungodly hour  
 when even bedbugs are at rest  
**POLICE BOOTS AND FISTS**  
 what do they want  
 this time.

Dikobe Martins

**AZANIA**

*for Basil April who died in 1967 in the frontline.*

Azania beautiful dark daughter of mother Afrika  
 let the seed of chimurenga  
 into your dry parched soil  
 let it take root  
 through strife, stress and storm  
 to blossom bloom and bear inkululeko.

Dikobe Martins

**KASSINGA, VILLAGE OF DEATH**

*for the people of Angola who have seen and heard  
 the devil citing scripture.*

**OUR BOYS ON THE BORDER**

mowed down like grass  
 ten thousand men, women and children

**NO COFFINS**  
**NO FLOWERS**  
**NO FUNERAL**  
**NO PRAYERS**

the black man is not supposed to have a soul!

**A MASSGRAVE**  
**BULLDOZED AND UNMARKED**

mother **AFRIKA** you know pain.

Dikobe Martins

**HISTORY WILL CONDEMN SOUTH AFRICA**

*for Peggy Dlamini*

this pain inside  
 we can't take it no more  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when we buried sixty-nine coffins in hungry Sharpeville soil  
 yes, we listened when Tiro said  
 there can be no struggle without casualties  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when we anointed Tiro's carelessly scattered bloodied remains in exile  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when Shezi was pushed under a screaming Germiston train  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when on a clear cloudless blue summer day  
 Timol decided to write his name in blood  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when Bantu Biko died naked wearing only chains  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when Mxenge died with the secret of murderers' knives  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cries  
 through the screams of detainees having their penises  
 nailed to prison wooden floors  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cries  
 through the dull thuds of detainees slipping from soap bars to eternity  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when Aggett was discovered hanging by the neck  
 like Mohapi before him  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when some mother's son died at an undisclosed prison  
 of undisclosed causes at an undisclosed time  
 we thought the ancestors heard our cry  
 when death stole into our hearts again  
 Bajabulile is gone  
 but her message remains

**MOBILISE DON'T MOURN – FREEDOM IS NOT FREE**

Dikobe Martins

# RUNNING AWAY

by Steve Jacobs

James was in trouble. His predicament was compounded by a number of factors, and he found himself balanced, emotionally, on a point midway between terror and jubilation. Such a dichotomy of feeling was made possible by a temperament which fluctuated between depression and elation. Looked at in moments of weakness, his position was one of entombment. He was trapped, a situation with which a free spirit could not live. But from the viewpoint which a feeling of strength afforded, James was filled with excitement at the variety of options which were in fact available.

One week ago, James had been looking after a research station on the banks of the Gouro River. Despite the grandeur of its title, this research station was nothing more than a collection of reed huts in the heart of the tsetse fly region of the Gouro.

One week previously, James had been in the bush. Now, he was in a cage, but about to escape; if everything worked out favourably.

One week ago, James had been looking after a research station on the banks of the Gouro River. Despite the grandeur of its title, this research station was nothing more than a collection of reed huts in the heart of the tsetse fly region of the Gouro. The most important of these huts housed an expensive microscope, through which tsetse flies were examined. This hut also contained all the data that had been accumulated during the preceding six months' period of observation.

James had very little interest in tsetse flies, although he loved the bush for the peace and the freedom which he could never experience in city life. As for the little grey insects whose existence had necessitated the establishment of the camp, James could generate no stronger feeling than a simple dislike. Obviously, he preferred dead tsetses; they could not suck blood, nor could they transmit sleeping sickness to their hosts. Of course, the tsetse fly researchers needed live subjects for study. This was all of little concern to James. He had been hired merely to look after the camp for a month while the researchers were attending conferences, collecting supplies, and enjoying civil-



isation. He had to ensure that everything would be in proper working order when they returned. To James, this was a further month's free passage. For James was a traveller. He was never in any one place for too long. As it was, he disregarded the expiry date of his visa. Getting out of the country would take care of itself, he thought in a time of strength. He had a great deal of strength during his stay in the bush.

But then, his misfortunes began. One afternoon while he was down river, smoking wild bees out of hollow mopani trees to get at their honey, the camp burnt down. Afterwards, although he questioned the locals closely, he was not able to ascertain the cause of the fire. Nevertheless, its effects were devastating. From where he stood, burning log in hand, knotted handkerchief about his face for protection, he heard the crackle of flames, as they devoured the dry grass round about the camp. He moved

quickly. He ran down to the river where the motor boat was waiting, but as he started the engine, a series of tremendous explosions shattered the composure of the bush. Frantically James drove back to the campsite, his hands cold with fear despite the heat.

When he arrived the camp was a smouldering ruin. The gas bottles,

There was only one course of action now available to James. He had to leave as quickly as possible. He cast one final, frightened look at the razed campsite, shouldered his rucksack, mumbled a few words to the bemused locals, and then boarded the motor boat.

which had exploded, looked like bladed propellers; the microscope was a burnt out skeleton. A few sheepish locals stood about protesting their innocence, and insisting that there was nothing they could have done to stop the blaze. Thankfully, his hut which was situated at some distance from the rest of the camp, had been untouched.

There was only one course of action now available to James. He had to leave. As quickly as possible. He cast one final, frightened look at the razed camp site, shouldered his rucksack, mumbled a few words to the bemused locals, and then boarded the motor boat. For six hours he travelled down river, hardly noticing the magnificent variety of bird life, or the herds of buck and zebra that came down to the river to drink. It was dusk when James beached the boat on the outskirts of Maung. A few interested cows watched him prepare a rough camp site for the night, but then returned to other more important tasks. And, despite the difficulty of his situation, James slept well out in the open beneath the stars, with the smell of cattle in his nostrils.

Early the following morning, he was on the road, hitch-hiking. A truck stopped, driven by locals who agreed to take him to Rhodestown. He sat on the back and contemplated his escape – his route to freedom. The ride was uncomfortable but he exulted in the wind that blew his hair back from his face, in the sun that burnt him red; he was on the road, away from his responsibilities. James hated responsibilities even more than he disliked tsetse flies. The latter only sucked blood; the former deprived one of one's soul.

Then he thought about his expired visa. With difficulty, precariously balanced on the back of the truck, he took his passport from his rucksack, and checked. And sighed. He had been in the country for twenty days in excess of his allotted time. He made a swift calculation. If he crossed the border today he would be liable for a fine of two hundred pula – which was one hundred more than he had; which meant that he would be held up in the country while proceedings were brought against him; which meant that the tsetse fly research people would be able to catch up with him.

Then James's mood dropped. The net

---

At a railway crossing, the possibility of escape by train occurred to James. It was rumoured that the south bound mail, passing the border in the early hours of the morning, was not checked by the passport control authorities.

---

was closing around him and he was going to be fried alive. The truck driver made a stop for lunch, and kindly bought a meal for James as well. But, instead of lifting his spirits, this generosity lowered them. To James the food appeared as a last meal. Nevertheless, he ate heartily, and considered his next course of action.

At a railway crossing, the possibility of escape by train occurred to James. It was rumoured that the south bound mail, passing the border in the early hours of the morning, was not checked by the passport control authorities. Perhaps he could leave the country safely in this manner.

At Rhodestown, James, windswept, and feeling exceptionally dirty, made immediately for the station. The ticket office was closed; nothing ever worked properly in this country. But a recent railway timetable was pasted up on a notice board. On careful study, the secrets of train movements, locked in that complex code of railways terminology, were revealed to him. It appeared that the mail train departed every Tuesday at midnight, and crossed the southern border before sunrise. Having been out in the bush so long, James was not entirely sure what day this was, but on enquiry, he was assured by an amused local that it was Friday.

This left James with spare time, a condition he detested, and no place in the city to stay – a dangerous situation. For if he was arrested for vagrancy, the net would be closed as surely as the nets used by the locals to catch bream in the Gouro River. He could certainly not afford to book in at either one of Rhodestown's two hotels.

It was at this moment that James was balanced at the point described earlier in the narrative, midway between terror and jubilation. The jubilation reflected the knowledge that he was after all, totally free of responsibility, and could do, basically, whatever he desired with the rest of his life; provided that everything worked out favourably. The terror came in when he thought too closely about his complex predicament. Then he felt like an insect trapped in a spider's web. Every twist toward freedom only resulted in further strangulation in the sticky strands.

Something will turn up, he thought, with the fatalistic outlook he had developed as a traveller, who is perpetually confronted with new, often surprising, situations.

The situation that did turn up was not one that he could have anticipated. It was a situation that had its roots in the realms of the bizarre. Suddenly, James was thrust into a nightmarish fantasy that was incredibly true.

---

'Hi,' said the woman's voice. 'Can I give you a ride somewhere?'

---

He was walking from the station building, mentally flipping a coin to decide whether good fortune would best be found to the left or to the right of the entrance, when a white landrover pulled up beside him. He was weary, dirty, and weighed under by his heavy pack. His first reaction was fear, and then resignation to the inevitable fact of his capture. He was, then, past caring who exactly was capturing him. He seemed to be fleeing from so many agencies that, in his mind, they combined to form one big spider with manifold legs, each of which wished to encapsule him.

'Hi,' said the woman's voice. 'Can I give you a ride somewhere?'

He looked up sharply. His luck was indeed changing, and he had not even been compelled to decide on which face his mental coin had landed. She was dark, had short hair, appeared plumpish – not very attractive. Still, one could not be selective as a fugitive traveller. One had to make do with whatever came along. James was a good-looking young man, and he had learned to use his assets to best advantage, even if they were disguised under a few days' worth of stubble and grime, even if the object of his attention was not one that would have been so courted under normal circumstances. He turned on his possibly most charming smile, blinked demurely, and radiated interest, not realising that he had no need to extend himself at all, that his path had already been decided.

---

For a moment he was dumbfounded. It had been so easy. Women travellers were usually picked up by men with certain preconceived ideas. Instances of the generic reverse occurring were very limited in James's experience.

---

'Got nowhere to go right now,' he said as abjectly as he could manage. The 'little-boy-lost' image often worked. Again, he did not realise that there was no necessity to play act. 'I could do with a cup of coffee and a wash, though,' he added ruefully.

'Hop in,' she invited.

For a moment he was dumbfounded. It had been so easy. Women travellers were usually picked up by men with certain preconceived ideas. Instances of the generic reverse occurring were very limited in James's experience. As a traveller who often had to rely on the charity of others, he found this to be unfairly chauvinistic. But now

She did not speak much as they drove through the winding streets of Rhodestown. Dusk had been subdued by overbearing night, and James unfamiliar with the area, was soon quite disorientated.

that he was suddenly on the receiving end, he felt a rush of blood, an elation that replaced the previous moment's despondency.

'Let's go,' he almost whooped, putting his rucksack in the rear seat. Nevertheless, he retained a degree of caution. He had once experienced the frightening indignity of having his pack stolen by a friendly motorist in the south of Spain. So James made a mental note of the landrover's registration plate, not that he would have been in a position to utilize the information, had he so needed, as he could hardly have sought aid from the local police.

She did not speak much as they drove through the winding streets of Rhodestown. Dusk had been subdued by overbearing night, and James, unfamiliar with the area, was soon quite disorientated. He still felt no great qualms; she appeared to be a fairly small person, and as long as he kept his wits, nothing dramatically wrong could befall him.

They entered a narrow driveway, and she gave him an intense smile through the darkness, so intense that he was forced to look away.

'My name is Susanna,' she said. Her accent was impossible to place. 'Come in and shower.' She made no further proposals.

**He was inspecting her surreptitiously — an art which he had learned during his travels. It was essential for the vulnerable traveller to be able to read characters and situations, and so keep one step ahead of trouble.**

James introduced himself and followed her into a surprisingly upper-middle class home; it was surprising to find such a degree of comfort and erudite materialism in a small town in the middle of a developing African country. After months of living in the bush, in one camp or another, James was overwhelmed at the wealth of literature and good music, at the plushness of the furnishings.

Suddenly, James felt claustrophobic, trapped; he would have walked out, but Susanna, as if reading his mind, offered him a cup of coffee. Coffee, and a desperate need to be unfettered by the bonds of any society, were James's major weaknesses, and he capitulated.

Soon afterward, he was seated comfortably, tiredly, in a soft settee, shaven and clean, embracing the warmth of a coffee cup, his pack securely positioned against the wall. He wanted to ask her why she had stopped for him, why she had extended this hospitality, but he feared to offend her. Besides, he had a suspicion of what the answer might be, and it was an answer which intimidated him.

He was inspecting her surreptitiously — an art which he had learned during his travels. It was essential for the vulnerable traveller to be able to read characters and situations, and so keep one step ahead of trouble. That was why he had left the tsetse fly camp so hurriedly. His mistake had been the visa. But for that, he would have been on his way out of the country already. However, in the bush one tends to ignore the absurdities of civilisation; like the necessity for visas. James was a citizen of the world, he could not be bound by petty entrance requirements imposed by imperious humans.

His main impression of her was intensity. In addition, he had decided that she was distinctly unattractive. If his suspicions were well-grounded, he was going to have to pay a terrible price for his residence here. The thought filled him with abhorrence.

Susanna was very short, and stocky. She walked with the gait of a little wrestler. Her intense smile betrayed a set of stained teeth; her masculine face was not softened by that grimace. And the tufts of black hair like forests, in her armpits, did nothing to improve the image.

'Have you eaten?' she asked.

'I had a pretty good lunch. The guy I hitched with bought it for me.' He was now reluctant to accept any favours from her, anything that might aggravate his position.

'How about some cake?' she offered.

That appeared innocuous enough, and he consented. She gave him a generous slice — he ate greedily, while she stared at him, as if at some prize specimen she had caught. He ignored her. He would have to leave quite soon, he knew. This situation could become intolerable. What at first had appeared to be good fortune was in fact a trap, more insidious than the others. He did not know where he would go. Possibly he could find a park in which to sleep.

**He saw a huge insect crawling at him as he lay helpless on the settee. It was an insect with a massive proboscis that sniffed hungrily in his direction.**

Something was happening to him. He was dissolving. He became aware of this

phenomenon gradually, as though every succeeding moment of unreality was in fact his normal state of consciousness. He shook his head, tried to concentrate on the room, but it was disappearing. He became aware of himself as a finite entity, but within the outlines of his physical shape, infinity existed: aeons of empty space-time.

'You've poisoned me,' he managed to say, with words that radiated outward, in ever-increasing letters until they struck her smiling face and shattered.

'Not poisoned,' she said. 'Drugged. I want you.'

He tried to move, tried to escape, but his limbs were constructed of infinite space, and would not respond. He was hallucinating. He saw a huge insect crawling at him as he lay helpless on the settee. It was an insect with a massive proboscis that sniffed hungrily in his direction.

'I want you,' it said in Susanna's voice. 'I am queen of the tsetse flies, and I have a voracious appetite. I have put you to sleep, and now I will suck out your blood.'

That's not the right order, James thought. You can't be a tsetse fly.

Susanna's face appeared, close up to his. She was unbuttoning his shirt, peeling off the layers that separated his infinity from the normal space of the other world. His drugged body would not react. He flopped like a rag doll in her arms.

'I'll carry you to bed,' she said, and he could not resist.

He saw a slit in the granite of a huge face, populated by immense, stained teeth, as the tsetse queen sucked into his mouth. He was naked, and she was caressing his body, his nipples, his stomach, his thighs. And he could feel himself becoming erect, in the course of his hallucination, and his erection was a burning log searching for the hollow in a mopani-tree where wild bees left their honey. He was burning, burning. And then she slipped onto him, impaling herself, and moving him up and down so that the friction intensified the burning a thousand times. And then he exploded, suddenly, into her, with amazing hallucinatory pictures of lights and colours, and the fire expanded beyond his loins, and he had set alight the research camp, and the gas bottles were destroyed by the force of his explosion, and a host of sheepish locals looked at him with stained teeth and denied all knowledge of the fire he had caused with the burning log, and everything was destroyed, except for his hut beyond the limits of the camp.

And James knew there was only one course of action now available to him. He had to leave. As quickly as possible.

**DIAGNOSIS : SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIER**

*A soldier without politics is an assassin.* — Samora Machel

I see your coloration, your ghost  
much clearer than did yourself  
when you traded sight for obedience  
and the futile doctrines of your skin

so when your truck danced  
on the road of your amazed innocence  
and your death spat from the sand  
in one enormous tongue  
and the legs came apart from your body  
and the blood ran, placidly,  
in the disregard of a foreign land  
it was too late for questions,

too late a humbling, the rage  
pulls back now lips without speech  
without a face,  
and the words are lost to your tattered mouth  
accepting flies like raisins;

the realisation you were tricked  
by the tales of a Humpty Dumpty  
parliament perched  
on the spattered walls of its army.

Everything's the same.  
It's far too hot in summer  
to mourn long for the ruptured dead  
or the herd boy child you one day shot  
who stood in the way of a heavy gun.

I mourn instead  
the profound contempt of our false rulers  
for all the flesh they crucify:

you're a victim too,  
you fool.

**LOVE POEM**

Spring finally on my lips.  
Through the trees,  
haloed in green suns,  
I wave my face  
like a handkerchief.

Can you hear me?  
My love, can you hear the tick  
of the heart, of the beast?

Without irony  
we eat  
each other.

**SUBURBAN PRAYER**

Lord God, take pity on me  
the telephone exchanges don't work  
the landscape is full of white boys

running around with guns on their shoulders  
and uniforms between their legs

an agapanthus in the garden  
gathers foul smells to it like an armpit

my face cracks in the mirror

and dying on the streets are  
too many dogs to count  
all dying for a master.

What else can I tell you, God?  
the wind has many hands in my hair  
I'm restless  
those dogs lift their legs on my  
aforementioned  
agapanthus, true theorists

I feel no *lust*, God  
either of the macro or the micro variety  
(i.e. metaphysics or physical physics)

give me a cause or a good woman  
give me your mercy

I have managed nothing  
on this rusted, slobbering day  
worthy of a name:

pregnant women tick like clocks,  
yawn, and cannot multiply.

**OPPRESSION**

I grope in the dark shadow  
of the Trust Bank  
for a voice to emit rainbows  
that I will recognise,  
finally, with shock,  
is mine

in colours too bright to do anything but speak

I wait on board ship  
for the flesh  
of my country to leave me  
so that I can learn,  
in pieces,  
by memory,  
to love it

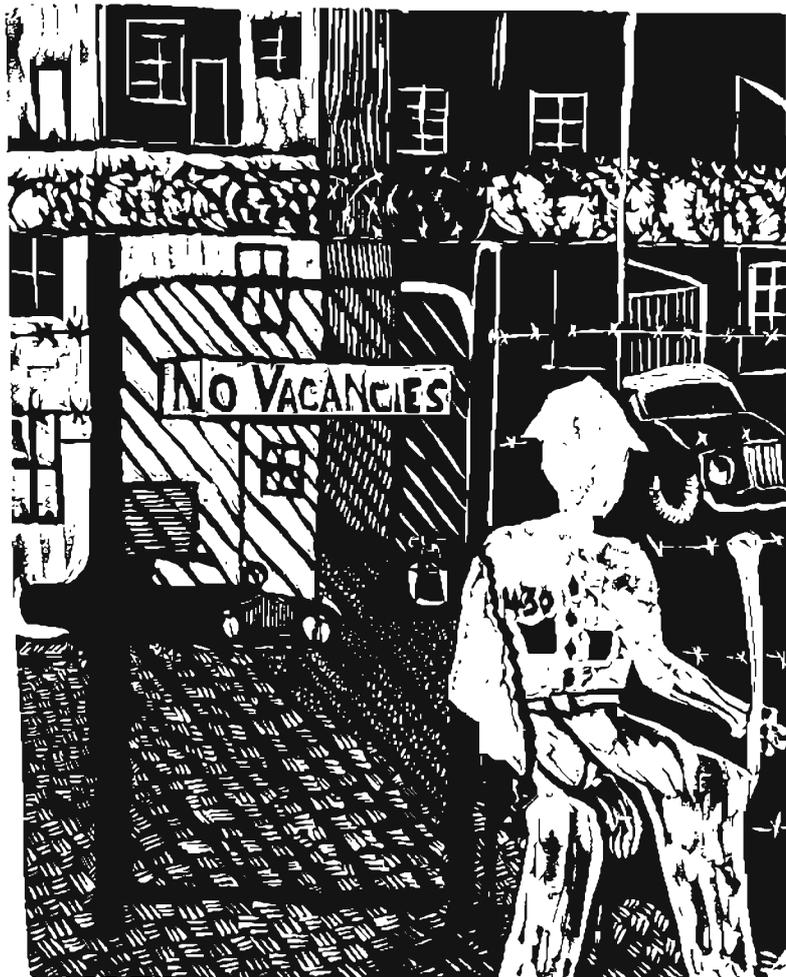
by forgetting the hate and pain of standing on it

I walk beside you,  
brother or sister,  
isolated by suspicion  
and by spies  
from knowing  
even  
you

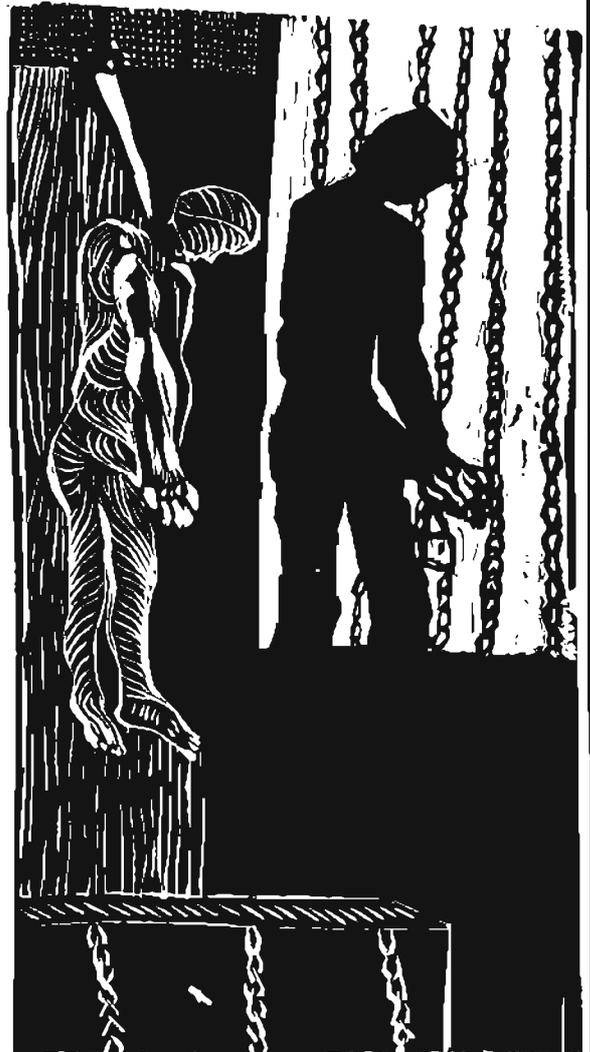
And this is what they call patience?



*Ebony Statues - bongiwe - '83*



*Unemployment: No vacancies - bongiwe - '83*



*Detention - Death in Detention - bongiwe - '83*

# SKIN DEEP

by Jean Gray

Illustrated by Percy Sedumedi



How can you not like someone who can mimic you so well and so without malice that you end up laughing at yourself, even when he caricatures your most embarrassing characteristics?

A born mimic, Ranjit continuously dissolved and re-formed his thin brown face with its strong nose and large dark eyes into the expressions and mannerisms of his targets. His wiry body and long fingers moved as expressive embellishments to a menagerie of facial gestures and a multitude of voices used with superb timing to portray so humorously his victims' personalities.

I rated Ranjit among the best of the young community development workers to whom I was helping to give on-the-job training one particularly hot pre-monsoon season, in a state that sprawled over the foothills of the western Himalayas.

---

... he did not come back to work soon and, after several more unsatisfactory answers to my enquiries, I found out where he lived and visited him one evening after work.

---

Intelligent, committed and hard working, sensitive to the needs of any situation, and always willing to go that extra kilometre, he helped inspire his fellow trainees by his cheerfulness and energy. His jokes and impersonations frequently saved situations threatened by the fatigue and irritations of our punishing training schedule.

And he could also take a joke against himself, roaring unreservedly with laughter upon discovering that he had carried an extra seven kilograms up a near vertical hillside track, thanks to a colleague surreptitiously inserting a heavy rock into his backpack.

So, returning one day from a long field trip with other trainees, I soon noticed his absence and asked for him.

'Oh, he's sick. Been away a week now,' was the reply.

'What's wrong?'

'Don't know, but he should be back soon.'

But he did not come back to work soon and, after several more unsatisfactory answers to my enquiries, I found out where he lived and visited him one evening after work.

In that jumbled hill town, with its narrow unordered alleys of overhanging

houses without street names and house numbers, locating someone's residence resembles challenging a maze and my instructions included such gems as: 'Go to Pandey's sweet shop; ask there for the nearest Hanuman shrine, and then walk in exactly the opposite direction.'

Eventually, by persistence, or luck, I found the building where Ranjit rented a room, and bent nearly double to take my foreigner's height and clumsiness through the low passage from the street to the inner paved courtyard so typical of local houses. I stood, eyeing the tiers of rooms in the four storey building that ran right round the central open courtyard, wondering which room housed Ranjit.

I jumped round at a loud splash. A woman had thrown a bowlful of dirty water into the courtyard, clearly a dump for household slops, and she stood there at her second floor window, looking at me enquiringly.

'Ranjit?' I asked.

Without speaking, she pointed to a room on the third floor. Thanking her, I looked around for the usual steep wide wooden staircase. I picked my way across the rubbish-strewn courtyard, ducked the low beams as I climbed, and

clipped along the wooden balcony-cum-passage to the room she had indicated.

---

**Perhaps they had awaited an excuse to leave, or felt embarrassed by an unknown foreigner's presence; I do not know.**

---

An untidy litter of shoes outside the door implied many visitors and I found the small room full of young men of Ranjit's age, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Peering through the door, I easily spotted Ranjit for he did not sit cross-legged like his visitors. He lay, looking tired and ill, on a thin mattress along one wall, covered by a light quilt of local white cloth dyed with a pattern of red fishes, one of the range of striking patterns I had frequently seen when walking through the market. His face, thinner than usual, with sunken eyes, broke immediately into a smile upon my greeting.

'Come in! Come in!' he said, ignoring completely that the room already overflowed. I looked around, wondering how to infiltrate politely but, before I had to try, several of his visitors began their goodbyes. Perhaps they had awaited an excuse to leave, or felt embarrassed by an unknown foreigner's presence; I do not know. But when farewells had finished and the pile of shoes declined, only two visitors and Ranjit remained and the room, albeit tiny, seemed empty in comparison.

I slipped off my shoes and, slapping at mosquitoes, sat on the low windowsill by Ranjit's head, thus avoiding sitting cross-legged, a habit I found too painful for muscles and joints not used to it since childhood.

'How are you? What's wrong?' I asked as I sat down.

'Oh just some weak nerves in my arms and legs,' he replied. 'Very much pain, so I cannot walk easily, and cannot grip things.' The smile had disappeared and he looked uncomfortable and near to crying.

'Have you seen a doctor?' I asked.

'Yes, and he has given me medicine. But it's not making much difference.'

'What's he say is wrong with you?'

'Oh, he didn't say; he just gave me the medicine.'

I cursed to myself, knowing how true this could be in a country where doctors protected their mystique by refusing to discuss illnesses with patients.

'Well, what medicine did he give you?' I asked, hoping to gain some clue to the doctor's diagnosis. Ranjit passed me two kinds of pills, a common brand of pain killer and a drug I recognised as a tranquilizer. I found little help there.

'I'm going to see the doctor again

tonight,' volunteered Ranjit.

'Can you get to see him all right? Can you walk?'

'My brother and my friend,' and he pointed in the local fashion with his face at the other two in the room, 'will help me down to the end of the alley, where I can get a taxi or rickshaw. I'll be all right.'

'Can I do anything to help?' I asked. He assured me not but I remained unconvinced. I sensed something in the situation that I did not fully understand. I felt a lack of complete frankness.

'Well, ask the doctor to tell you what he thinks is wrong with you,' I said, as I rose to leave.

'Yes, yes. I will,' said Ranjit quickly, too quickly. He seemed embarrassed. I found my shoes and left, puzzling over the encounter.

Next morning I again visited Ranjit. Being just before working hours, no crowd thronged the room and Ranjit had as company only the friend who had stayed behind the night before.

---

**I began to think I had better leave, and then he turned to me with tears in his eyes and said: 'You've been very good to me during training, and so I wish I could tell you, but there are some illnesses in our society, in our culture, that you mustn't talk about . . .'**

---

'Hello,' I said, stooping shoeless through the low doorway.

'How are you this morning? What did the doctor say?'

'I feel the same as yesterday,' said Ranjit, looking very weak as he raised himself on one elbow to greet me.

'What did the doctor say?' I repeated.

'Oh, he just said something was wrong with my nerves,' replied Ranjit, not meeting my eyes.

I sat on the windowsill, the morning sun already hot on my back, and thought awhile. Obviously the surface of this situation concealed something seriously wrong.

'I've brought some magazines for you, and some oranges,' I said, handing him these gifts. He thanked me several times and as he turned away I could see the tears glinting in his eyes.

'Look Ranjit, what is wrong with you? Please tell me. I want to help you if I can, but can't really help you if I don't understand the problem. Doesn't the doctor know what's wrong? Or does he really know, but you don't want to tell me?' I paused, a little shocked at my crassness in pushing him like that.

Ranjit lay, saying nothing and look-

ing elsewhere. I began to think I had better leave, and then he turned to me with tears in his eyes and said: 'You've been very good to me during training, and so I wish I could tell you, but there are some illnesses in our society, in our culture, that you mustn't talk about, because to have those illnesses in you is just not acceptable to other people. If people know you have those illnesses, you lose your job and all your friends. I just cannot tell you what is wrong with me.'

'But I'm not from your society; I'm not from your culture. I'm a foreigner and, in my society, in my culture, there's no illness which would make people treat other people like that. You can tell me without worrying. Certainly I don't think that way about any illness, and I promise you I'll not tell anyone else.'

I stopped as I said that, a warning bell ringing in my mind. Was it really true that people in my culture, that I myself, were quite so tolerant and enlightened? How would they react to finding that their workmates had advanced syphilis, or were coughing everywhere with TB of the lungs, or had a mental illness? How would I react? Deep down, did I really have the tolerance I claimed.

Another thought came. Perhaps I was pushing him too far in front of his friend. Perhaps he could not speak openly near his friend from the local culture, who might well react to the truth of his illness just as Ranjit had described.

I glanced at his friend and Ranjit, sharp as ever, caught and understood my look. 'No, it's not because of him. He doesn't speak any English so he cannot understand us. Anyway, he knows. He's come up here from my family to look after me.'

We both sat silent. I wondered what to do next. Ranjit's illness was entirely his business. He had every right to his privacy. But, possibly I could help him; I lacked the shackles of local cultural values and practices; I had doctor friends; and I had access to more money than ever Ranjit could tap. I also recognised a somewhat selfish motive for my interest. I had helped invest considerable time and trouble in Ranjit's training and I did not want to see it wasted.

However, what should I do now? Should I persist in pursuing the problem and risk overstepping boundaries of acceptable behaviour, or should I retreat tactfully and leave Ranjit to cope himself without me embarrassing him?

Before I had to make this decision, Ranjit began to speak again, softly and sadly, with no sign of the cheerful

mimic, the joke-cracking entertainer: 'I have an illness. I have had it a long time now. I had it in my village before I came here. I took treatment from a doctor in a town nearby. I became much better. So I stopped taking the medicine when I came here. And now the illness has returned, and it's much worse. It's a horrible illness and people are terrified of it. If people here knew I had it, I'd lose my job and be chased out of this room. I'd be finished.'

'What is this illness? Tuberculosis?'

'No TB is bad enough, but this is much worse.'

'Is it leprosy?' He nodded mutely, not looking at me.

---

**On reaching my office, I ensured privacy and then rang my friend, a foreigner employed as doctor to the expatriate personnel of a large foreign aid operation. I explained carefully the case's background, described the medicines, and asked her advice.**

---

I sat there stunned. I remembered the warning bell when I had said so glibly, only minutes before, that no one in my culture would treat a sick person so badly. Oh yes? And what would people do if they learned that the person standing next to them had leprosy?

Old fears, however wrongly based on myth, would lie just beneath the surface. Indeed, they lay very close beneath the surface in me. I remembered how often I had been close to Ranjit physically, how often I had touched him. Ranjit had been a guest in my house; I had accompanied him on field trips which involved much physical contact. Even now, I sat almost touching him and his sickbed. If that disease truly deserved its reputation for infectiousness, then I had had contact a hundred times over.

I reacted initially to his disclosure with self-preservation. I wanted to get away from him. I wanted to escape from the room. I wanted somehow to cleanse myself, to protect myself. My vaunted tolerance reached indeed only skin deep.

But, I had committed myself. I had said that people like me did not reject people with any disease. Nobody had made me say this. I had said it quite voluntarily and almost certainly my saying it had finally overcome Ranjit's considerable reluctance to explain. I could not walk out on him now, no matter what pressures I faced from my primitive fears. I had to stay. I had to try to help him.

So I asked him more questions about his history with the disease. I noted the names and dosages of his

medicines and told him I would consult a doctor friend without revealing my 'patient's' identity. I stayed a little longer; cracked a few jokes that brought weak smiles to his face, and then left, thinking long and hard as I walked away.

On reaching my office, I ensured privacy and then rang my friend, a foreigner employed as doctor to the expatriate personnel of a large foreign aid operation. I explained carefully the case's background, described the medicines, and asked her advice.

'Well, those medicines are useless for leprosy. They might make him feel a little better temporarily, but they won't stop the disease at all. His doctor must be treating him for something else. If he really has leprosy, then he should go to a special leprosy hospital. It's out of town, about twenty kilometres, and it's run by missionaries, but they know what they are doing. Try to persuade him to go there. And if he won't go to them, then they come into town once a week and run a leprosy clinic at the hospital here. You might persuade him to visit that clinic next Tuesday. Tell him to ask for the 'Hansen's Disease Clinic.' That's what they call it to avoid using the word leprosy. 'Hansen's Disease' is the other name for leprosy.'

---

**The next day being the weekend holiday, I had time to take Ranjit to the leprosy hospital without people noticing my absence.**

---

On my way home from work, I passed on this advice, after Ranjit's roomful of friends had emptied one by one, leaving only Ranjit's brother and his companion of that morning. Ranjit's manner indicated clearly that I could talk openly in front of his brother too. I repeated my friend's comments, which left Ranjit very thoughtful.

After discussion with his brother and friend, he said: 'If you think it's right to see these people, then I'll do it. But I cannot go to the clinic here in town; it's too public at that hospital. Somebody who knows me might see me there and guess I have leprosy. They'll tell everybody and I'll lose my job and be hunted out of here. But how can I get out to the leprosy hospital? It's a long way, and I know how rough that road is. No buses go that way and no taxis will go down such a rough road. It's too far for a rickshaw and I can't walk that far as I am now.'

'Don't worry about that. Getting you there is *my* problem. All *you* have to do is to agree to go, and to listen to the doctor's instructions when we get there.'

Ranjit pondered awhile and then nodded doubtfully. Not giving him a

chance to change his mind, I quickly left, asking him to be ready at nine o'clock the next morning, when I would pick him up.

The next day being the weekend holiday, I had time to take Ranjit to the leprosy hospital without people noticing my absence. In view of Ranjit's great worry about people learning his secret, with consequent loss of his job and lodgings (a fear that I recognised as realistic) I had decided to tell no one except my doctor friend. I therefore found myself embarrassed in borrowing a jeep from another friend for the trip to the hospital without explaining frankly why I needed it.

I parked at the end of the alley, and went to collect Ranjit. His brother and friend helped him down the stairs, along the alley, and into the jeep, climbing in after him. We progressed slowly, gently easing our way through the rickshaws, cyclists, vendors, buyers and tourists thronging the market area, and then increased speed on reaching the more open streets. We soon slowed down for the rough road to the leprosy hospital.

The road dipped and soared, wound and twisted until, in a small valley, among the bright green of terraced rice seedlings, we found the hospital buildings scattered under trees along a steep track winding up from the road.

We halted outside the main building and I suggested that the others wait in the vehicle, not least because of a heavy monsoon shower. Jumping down, I ran to the building, stopping in the doorway beside a man who had appeared there gazing out impassively at his visitors. Spectacles with cheap-looking wire rims framed calm dark eyes in a brown face under shiny baldness. He stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of a worn but clean white coat, which covered a faded shirt and trousers.

'I'm looking for the leprosy hospital,' I said.

'You've found it. I'm Dr Chandra Gupta, the Director. Can I help you?'

I introduced myself and explained briefly but carefully our purpose.

'Bring the young man in. Let me examine him, and then perhaps we'll do some tests.'

Ranjit's brother and friend helped him, walking slowly through the final drops of the passing shower. The doctor examined him, paying particular attention to Ranjit's arms and shins, and to his hands and feet, and then to his chest and back where even I could see several light coloured patches with slightly raised edges.

As an orderly began to scrape samples of skin flakes, starting above

the end of Ranjit's eyebrows, the doctor beckoned and led me outside, down a path out of earshot of the others.

'It looks like a case of neglected leprosy, and I'm sure the tests will confirm it,' he said.

'How bad is he?'

'Hm. Much damage has already occurred in his arms and legs and hands and feet, and that's irreversible. But if the disease could be stopped now he would be able to lead a fairly normal life once the present reaction period is over. He should stay here for a week or two of regular, supervised treatment. But it's so very difficult to get people to come here for treatment, particularly educated people like him. They're too scared of losing their jobs, and how can you blame them, given local attitudes to the disease and the high rate of unemployment among the young educated.'

'That's the problem with leprosy,' he went on. 'The drugs to control and cure it are well enough known, and some cost very little. That's not the difficulty. The real problem lies in persuading people to take the drugs for long enough. Many times people enrol at our Tuesday clinic in town for treatment and then, after a few weeks, they stop coming, long before the treatment can really work. They get scared that someone will see them there, and they stop coming. Then, months or years later, when the disease has progressed still further, and they feel ill again, they come back and we have to start all over again, only things are usually much worse by then. Or else they turn up somewhere else, at another clinic, under another name.'

'It's so terribly frustrating. We know that there are thousands of lepers in this country whom we could help. But we can help them only if they come for treatment. If you can persuade your young friend to stay here for a week or two, we could do a lot to move him in the right direction, but he'll probably refuse to come. Please, let me show you round. You can see for yourself what we do.'

And he took my arm and led me towards the next building. He must have sensed my substantial lack of enthusiasm for he turned and said: 'It's all right, there's virtually no risk. I touch my patients many times every day. You mustn't allow yourself to be swayed by ancient fears about leprosy.'

All very well for you, I thought, but those ancient fears *do* sway me, greatly. However, I felt I just had to go with him, partly to avoid losing face, and partly just to show myself that I could control those fears.

We entered a ward of about ten beds,

**The patient too watched me, with still brown eyes and stoical face, and I felt the others in the ward watching too.**

each with a man sitting or standing by it, or lying on it. They were a living textbook, a catalogue of the various stages of the disease, shown to me page by page by Dr Gupta as he led me round. Some showed few signs at all, just some light coloured skin patches. Others had swollen blackened wrists and ankles, fingers and toes, like Ranjit's. Still others, in more advanced stages, had their fingers and toes, and even facial extremities, apparently 'melted away'. All had skin of a most unusual dark chocolate hue, with an almost artificial tone to it, far far darker than that of Dr Gupta.

As the doctor stopped by each bed, he explained how far the disease had spread in each case. He could not have had a more unwilling listener. 'Here, feel how the bacilli have attacked the nerve, inflaming and thickening it.' He lifted up a patient's arm, holding it out for me to touch.

Everything in me screamed at me not to touch. The doctor stood, holding the man's arm, watching me. The patient too watched me, with still brown eyes and stoical face, and I felt the others in the ward watching too. Did they know the battle raging inside me?

'Go on, feel it. It's quite safe,' said the doctor quietly. 'There's soap and water outside the door. You can wash yourself afterwards if you want. And anyway, if you've had a BCG vaccination against TB you're probably protected against leprosy, so don't worry.'

What could I do? If I refused, I would reinforce the belief of every patient there that they had a socially disastrous disease that they must conceal at all costs. And all because of the foolish, unfounded, primitive fears of a foreigner they had never asked to visit them. I steeled myself, reached out, and ran my fingers down the man's arm, feeling the thickened nerve. From then on, until we left that ward and stopped at the tap outside, I had difficulty concentrating on the doctor's words. All my attention seemed focused on the tips of my fingers.

Reluctantly, I followed the doctor to the next ward, full of women showing the same range of symptoms. I noticed one, a youngish woman, better dressed than the rest. Her skin lacked the chocolate hue of her fellow patients but, as if to compensate, she had many eruptions, like boils, repulsive weeping bumps, scattered over the skin of her arms and face, and in her hair.

'That's the new antibiotic, Rifamp-

icin,' said the doctor. 'Very effective against both TB and leprosy. It destroys the bacillus organisms which are like little rods so they break up and come out through the skin in those bumps. They may look horrible to you, but I'm glad to see them. They show the drug working and the disease in retreat. I wish we could use it on all our patients but, alas, it costs far too much. We have a very small budget.'

'If you can't afford the new antibiotic, what do you use?'

'Dapsone is a basic drug used everywhere for leprosy, and it has been for years. It's not spectacular in its effects, but it controls the disease and it's comparatively cheap. The problem is to persuade patients to take it for long enough to give it a chance to work. So many social factors make people stop taking treatment — misunderstandings, ignorance, fears, pressures to keep working and to keep it secret. The whole mass of misbeliefs and myths about leprosy condemn so many people to unnecessary suffering.'

'Is there just this one other drug?'

'No, there's another too. It's quite effective; it's not too expensive. We use it here. But it turns the skin chocolate brown, like the people you've seen here. And now, many know that people whose skin turns that colour are being treated for leprosy, so patients don't want that drug in case their colour advertises their leprosy and they lose their jobs. We can really only use it here with in-patients. Very few who attend our out-patients clinic in town will accept it. And we cannot make them. How can we make them lose their jobs in the name of better treatment? If they lose their jobs and are driven out of their lodgings because our drug has publicised their leprosy, they'll have to go somewhere else, and then they'll stop treatment and be even worse off.'

As he led me outside, he continued: 'It's so frustrating. It's like trying to eat rice with both hands tied behind your back. You get only a few of the grains, and slowly. If only Rifampicin was cheaper, it would be the answer. It's quick, and very effective. The bumps are the only visible signs of treatment, and they soon disappear. A patient could take a few days off work while the bumps showed, and no one else would know.'

'Would Rifampicin be effective for Ranjit?'

'Almost certainly. Very effective,' came the reply, without hesitation. 'But then it would be equally effective for most of my other patients too. But I have no supplies and, if I had, how could I give it to one patient and not to others?'

'But what about that woman back

Who was I to play God that this person should have access to more effective treatment, and that person not? By what right could I make that decision? In fact, my ability to decide came only from my possessing enough money to buy the drug, and that seemed a very poor basis for this power of deciding who should have a better chance of recovering than others.

there? You said she was using Rifampicin.'

'Ah, she's from a wealthy family which buys it for her. She's here only to avoid people seeing her with those bumps erupting. It's like so many things in life. If you have money, you can buy yourself privileges.'

He spoke without bitterness, rather with resignation, but it made me stop and think, for I had very nearly offered to pay for Rifampicin for Ranjit's treatment. But why should he have the privilege of more effective treatment when clearly so many others needed similar treatment but had no access to it? I found the question disturbing.

Who was I to play God that this person should have access to more effective treatment, and that person not? By what right could I make that decision? In fact, my ability to decide came only from my possessing enough money to buy the drug, and that seemed a very poor basis for this power of deciding who should have a better chance of recovering than others.

But I did not have enough money to buy Rifampicin for all the leprosy sufferers in the world, or even in this one country, or even probably in this one hospital. Perhaps if I could not buy it for everyone, I should buy it for none. But that seemed stupid, a throwing away of the chance for even one just for fairness to the many. But if I bought Rifampicin for one person only, why for Ranjit? Why not for any other one of the patients I had just seen?

Ah, I argued to myself, but Ranjit is special. He has brains and ability and talent and special training. He has the potential to become a leader and to help improve things for everyone, including leprosy sufferers.

However, although appearing logical, this argument seemed specious, a glib rationalisation to solve my difficulty. And it contained disturbing elitist privilege overtones. In fact, as I gradually realised, my wishing to buy the drug for Ranjit rather than for any other really reflected an age-old instinct in humans to look after family and clan. Ranjit I knew and liked and respected. He was part of my 'family' at work. I had invested time and trouble

in helping train him. In helping his treatment, I was merely looking after my own. I might as well face up to the limits of my wish to be 'helpful' or 'charitable', or however I wished to describe it, it was largely self-interest.

'O.K.' I said, 'I'll provide Rifampicin for Ranjit. How much, and where do I get it?'

'I'll write you a prescription,' said the doctor, without comment. By this time we had returned to Ranjit and his friends and the doctor explained his diagnosis to Ranjit. I added: 'The doctor suggests you stay here a while for treatment. How about it?'

Silent, he looked first at his brother and friend, and then at the ground. 'How long for, and what would it cost?'

'Probably ten days to three weeks,' replied the doctor. 'Depending on how you respond to treatment. It will cost nothing except what you pay for food.'

Again silent, Ranjit considered the implications. 'All right,' he said at last. 'But I'll have to go home today and return in a day or two.'

I asked for the prescription and we left, Ranjit and his companions in intense discussion while I drove. Eventually, Ranjit addressed me: 'I'll have to tell my boss and my friends that I am returning home to convalesce. I cannot tell them I'm going to that place or I'll lose my job and never get another. That's why I couldn't stay there tonight. I have to prepare as if for going home. I'll be ready for the hospital the day after tomorrow.'

'Good,' I said. 'I'll take you there that evening.'

Dropping all three at the end of the alley, I returned the jeep, again embarrassed in asking for its further use two days later. I found a shop selling Rifampicin. While not exceptionally expensive to someone used to the grossly inflated medicine prices of America or Europe, it would have absorbed all of Ranjit's salary to use the drug in the quantity prescribed, leaving him nothing for food and rent. I bought a month's supply and gave the package to Ranjit as we set off two evenings later for the hospital.

'It's just some medicine the doctor wants you to take,' I replied to his query, and he sat pensively, looking at it.

'Ranjit,' I said, as we neared the hospital. 'I think your friend and brother need tests too. They have had much contact with you. It's better to be safe.'

The other two digested this suggestion in silence when Ranjit repeated it, but no one objected when I raised it with the doctor. He shrugged. 'All right. I guess we should test them.

But not everyone exposed to leprosy contracts it, even if the exposure is heavy. It seems to attack some people and not others, and it's not clear why. But we'll test them.'

I could barely resist asking him to test me too, justifying it by my contact with Ranjit, but he would probably have thought (with good reason) that I was still irrationally anxious after my experience in the ward. My logic told me the risk barely existed and that it was far too early for tests to show anything anyway. But logic and emotion make uneasy bedfellows and my emotions strongly wished me to make a request.

In fact, some months later, I did visit the Tuesday leprosy out-patients' clinic in town to request a test, following the discovery of a white mark on the back of my neck, out of normal mirror range. The mark was in fact nothing but a previously unnoticed old scar, but when someone commented on it, all my suppressed fears surfaced immediately.

The doctor (Dr Gupta had left by then) ruled out leprosy with polite tolerance for this foreigner's neurosis, without even bothering with tests. My enlightened attitudes to leprosy and the reality of its risks remained truly only skin deep.

But to return to that evening. With samples taken from brother and friend (they proved negative) we drove off, leaving Ranjit waving and smiling uncertainly in the doorway. Knowing his liberal political views and moderate Hinduism, I wondered how he would react to the Christian proselytizing I guessed he would face at that mission-run hospital. However, it seemed a small price to pay if he could escape the clutches of leprosy.

As the leprosy hospital lacked a telephone, I could follow Ranjit's progress only by contacting Dr Gupta when he ran the Tuesday clinic in town. He confirmed good progress, thanks to Rifampicin and, after two weeks, reported Ranjit had been discharged that day, catching a lift back to town with the mission vehicle.

The doctor advised a long period of further rest from work and said Ranjit should never again get very tired, for example through too much walking, and that he should periodically attend the out-patients' clinic. He recommended continuing with Rifampicin for a further month so I needed to buy more.

That evening I took the extra supply to Ranjit. News of his return had soon spread and his popularity once again meant a crowded room. Ranjit himself looked much healthier and pleased to see me. Once his visitors had left, he

announced proudly: 'I'm going back to work tomorrow.'

'But you mustn't,' I protested. 'You know the doctor's prescribed a long rest and then only light work.'

'But I've been away from work so much! If I don't work soon, I'll lose my job, and then what'll happen to me? It's not like your country. Jobs are very hard to get here, and there's no dole, no unemployment payments. You fend for yourself here.'

'I don't think you risk your job. I know your boss rates you highly. He would not willingly lose you. So, you don't need to hurry back to work just to save your job. And there's another thing too. Are you still infectious? What did the doctor say? If you are, then it's not fair to all of us at work for you to come back before the doctor clears you. You must find out from him.'

Ranjit's face fell, and then set in a stubborn look. The atmosphere became strained, so I soon left. But he did not

**From this sequence, and from other information and experiences, I gradually suspected that Ranjit was avoiding me. I wondered why and guessed embarrassment at my financial help and at disregarding my advice about returning to work.**

appear at work the next day or the next. The day after that I left on another long field trip. On my return, I enquired after Ranjit. He had returned to work the day after I had left, but had subsequently requested leave and left for his home village the day before my scheduled return.

From this sequence, and from other information and experiences, I gradually suspected that Ranjit was avoiding me. I wondered why and guessed embarrassment at my financial help and at disregarding my advice about returning to work.

It was a clear clash of viewpoints. The risk of infecting his co-workers worried me, together with the risk to his full recovery from too early a return. I could not see why Ranjit rated these so lightly. But Ranjit feared losing his job and could not see why I did not acknowledge this. Our differing backgrounds produced greatly differing approaches to these questions.

Shortly thereafter, I finished my training role with Ranjit's group and started another task with a different organisation based in the same town. I periodically enquired about Ranjit. 'On leave,' they said. As my contacts with his organisation declined, my enquiries died away too.

So, my surprise was great one day some months later when, feeling a hand

on my shoulder while shopping in the crowded market, I turned to find a smiling Ranjit. He looked far healthier still, and his replies confirmed this impression.

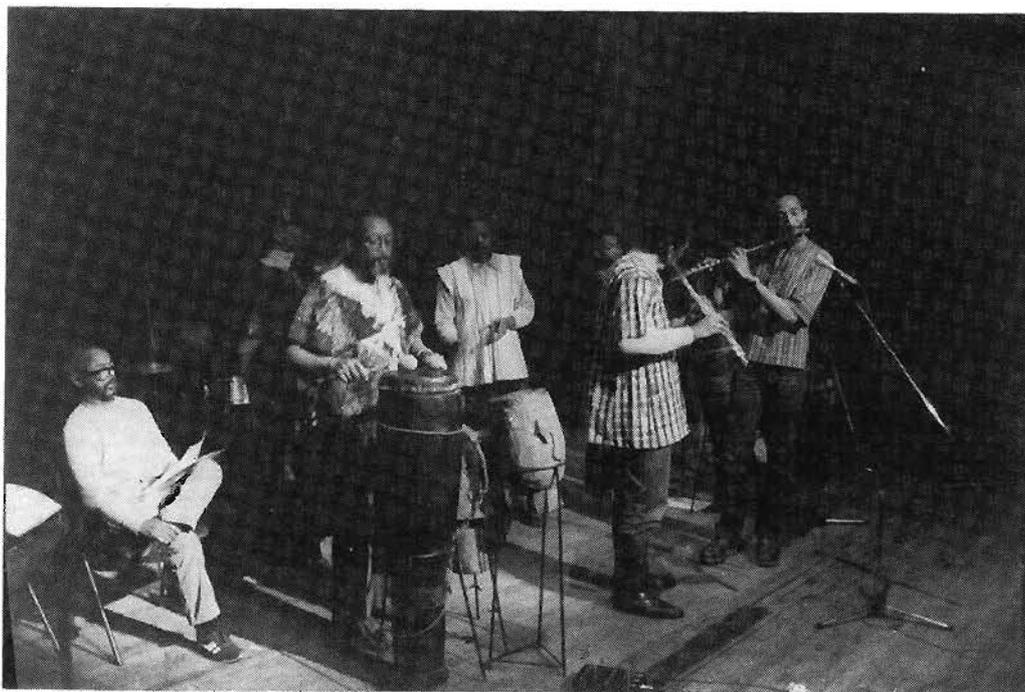
'Yes, the doctor says I'm no longer infectious. The disease stopped completely thanks to that medicine. I'm working again. I leave tomorrow on a field trip.'

'But should you do field trips at all? Didn't the doctor say you mustn't get too tired. You know you have to walk all day on field trips for many days. You'll get very tired and it'll hurt your damaged legs.'

He shrugged. 'That's true. But what can I do? If I want to keep my job I have to do the field trips. In your society these things may be understood, and perhaps your boss would give you another easier job. But here, it's the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest. If I explain my problem to my boss, I'll lose my job. If I lose my job I'm finished: I have no future. So I'll do the field trips and I need it to pay back all I had to borrow whilst ill. Don't worry. I'll be all right. Many thanks for all your help.'

And, with his face, voice and gestures so exactly mimicking my over-serious, paternalistic, heavy-handed concern that I just had to smile, he disappeared into the crowd.

## MAKING MUSIC

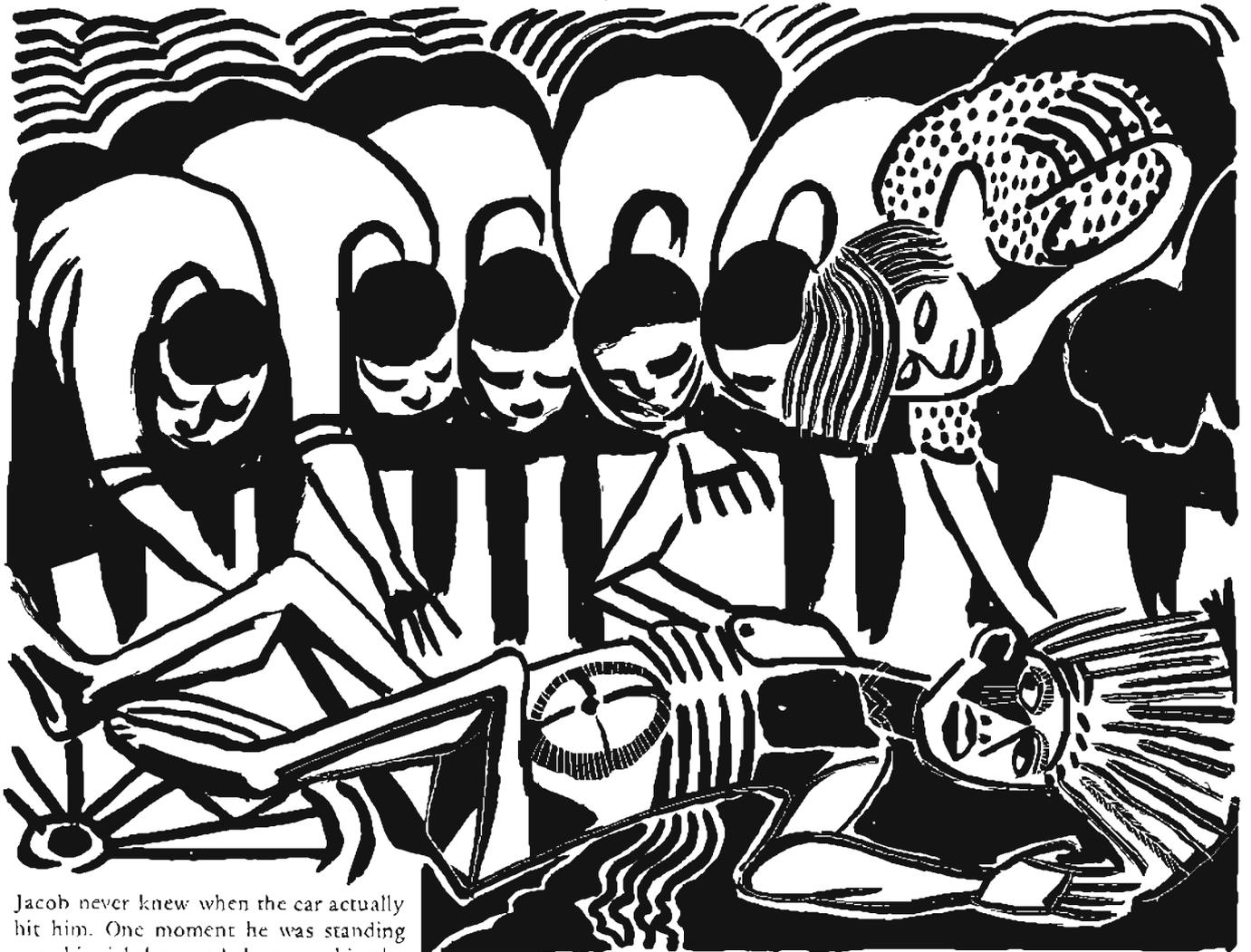


*James Matthews with the Pula Arts Commune in London*

# THE LOVE BEADS

by Jayapraga Reddy

Illustrated by Mzwakhe



Jacob never knew when the car actually hit him. One moment he was standing near his rickshaw and the next thing he knew was that he was thrown violently. He opened his eyes groaning with pain and felt the hard pavement beneath him and found a sea of anxious faces swimming in a hazy mist. Then he remembered the rickshaw and tried to sit up but sank back when a wave of pain engulfed him. He shut his eyes in agony. A murmur of sympathy rippled through the crowd. He felt their oppressive closeness and wished they would go away. Suddenly he became aware of someone dabbing his forehead with something cool. His eyes flew open and he looked straight into the calm face of a white woman. With an effort

---

The next day he awoke and became aware of the cleanly antiseptic smell of the ward. It was a mission hospital run by Americans. The nurses were cheerful and gay as they bustled about briskly.

---

he tried to free his mind of the crippling shackles of pain in an attempt to recall what might have happened, but couldn't.

'There's been an accident,' said the woman, perceiving his bewilderment.

'You've been hurt. I'm trying to sponge the blood from your forehead.'

Then he remembered the rickshaw.

'Where is . . . my rickshaw?' he enunciated with difficulty.

The woman gestured vaguely in its direction.

'There is not much damage. Just a smashed wheel,' she answered reassuringly.

Once again he tried to sit up but the woman laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

'No, no you mustn't! Just lie still. The ambulance will be here soon,' she said firmly but kindly.

The ambulance arrived and he was lifted in by two strong, burly attendants. He felt the swaying motion of the van as it raced to the hospital.

In the hospital they dressed his wounds and set his broken leg, and he was admitted.

The next day he awoke and became aware of the cleanly antiseptic smell of the ward. It was a mission hospital run by Americans. The nurses were cheerful and gay as they bustled about briskly. There was the clatter of bed-pans and the squeal of the breakfast trolley as the nurse crumpled it in. Jacob looked upon

---

She was pleasant to chat to and he enjoyed the daily routine of bedbaths and bed-making. She laughed easily and would often sing as she went about her duties. He told her about his job as a rickshaw-driver. He showed her a photograph of himself posing with some tourists. It showed him standing in his proud stance wearing his colourful Zulu head-dress of feathers and beads.

---

the scene of hospital activity and decided it was going to be quite a pleasant stay.

A nurse came to his bedside. She was a young Basotho of medium height with a skin like smooth, milkless cocoa. Her eyes were clear and wide.

'Would you like some tea?' she asked in a soft, mellifluous voice, speaking in Zulu.

Jacob nodded realising suddenly that his throat was parched and dry. He raised himself on his elbow.

'No, don't sit up. See I've poured it into a feeding mug,' she said gently.

Later as she helped him with his bed-bath, she told him about herself. Her name was Mandy. Her father owned a shop in Lesotho. There was just one brother who was a doctor in the same hospital.

'I'm going on leave at the end of the month', she said, her eyes sparkling in eager anticipation.

She was pleasant to chat to and he enjoyed the daily routine of bedbaths and bed-making. She laughed easily and would often sing as she went about her duties. He told her about his job as a rickshaw-driver. He showed her a photograph of himself posing with some tourists. It showed him standing in his proud stance wearing his colourful Zulu headdress of feathers and beads.

Jacob decided it was a treat to be ill, and was content. He lay there and waited for his leg to mend.

Occasionally he thought about Sarah. By now she might have given birth to his fourth child, perhaps another son, he thought with satisfaction. She would be waiting for the money which he sent her every week and if it never came, she wouldn't complain. She was a good woman, content if there was enough and patiently uncomplaining if there wasn't. He tried to picture her in their little hut in the Transkei with his sons and her old mother. He could see her gathering mealies with the youngest child slung on her back. She would sing to him if he cried. When she ran out of money, she would gather the grass and start weaving mats which she would then sell in the suburbs. She would leave her sons with her mother for the suburbs were far and needed two days of travelling. Yes, Sarah was a good woman. A daughter of the earth, she was simple, solid and clean. She was not like the town women who were hard

---

**The love beads. It was the necklace which Sarah had given him when he had first met her. The yellow symbolized jealousy and her having threaded very few of these meant that she feared very little from other women.**

---

and modern and who tried to imitate the white women in their dress and attitude to men. He thought of some of his friends in the townships who had married modern women. There, wives were different. Some of them smoked and most of them nagged. Sarah never nagged. She didn't know the meaning of the word. He smiled as he thought of these things. He put out his hand and felt amongst his things in the little cupboard beside his bed. His eyes lit up with secret pleasure as he found what he sought. He drew it out and looked at it, remembering. It was a necklace of brightly coloured beads. There were a few yellow beads at the ends followed by black ones which were a little more than the yellow. This was followed by a row of gay red beads which made up most of the necklace. The love beads. It was the necklace which Sarah had given him when he had first met her. The yellow symbolized jealousy and her having threaded very few of these meant that she feared very little from other women. Black meant sorrow, the sorrow that she felt every time they parted and which was more than her jealousy. Red meant her love and it made up the major part of her necklace because it symbolized the abundance of her love for him. She had given him the necklace at their first parting. His job in Durban as a rickshaw-driver meant long periods away from home. Because of the law Sarah could not live with him in the township. She understood the situation and accepted it unquestioningly. So once a month he went home to the Transkei.

He looked forward to his job on the beachfront. His more modern friends regarded his job with contempt. 'The white man wants you near him because it suits his trade.'

Perhaps it was true but he did not let it worry him. The pay was good and the job not too difficult.

Thus the days passed. Jacob's leg was mending well and he grew accustomed to the set routine of the hospital. Meals in bed, bedbaths, not to mention the companionship of a gay and vivacious young woman, it was an unaccustomed luxury and Jacob lay back and enjoyed himself.

Mandy was popular with the other patients too. She was gentle and considerate and they loved her infectious gaiety. She was always singing and had a ready word of encouragement for those who were feeling depressed. Even the weakest patient managed a faint smile when she was around.

'Come now, this morning you look as if you have forgotten how to smile,' she said to Jacob one morning when he was feeling at a low ebb.

He did not answer immediately but

remained morose. She looked at him lying there, all strong and solid, like sculptured coal with the lines of his face deeply entrenched as if carved into place by a skilful hand. She stood patiently at his bedside and wondered what was behind his sudden depression. She smiled and tried to make light of it.

---

**How could he explain that he wanted her to stay with him always. How could he explain that he felt about her the way he had not felt about any woman since he had married Sarah?**

---

'Come now, of all the patients in the ward you should be the most cheerful. You are making such good progress and soon you'll be going home. So what is wrong?' she asked.

He looked at her for a long moment and then turned away.

'You will be going away next week,' he said simply.

She understood then and the smile on her face died. She did not have the heart to tell him that she was used to this sort of reaction from her patients. But something within her warned her that this time it was not to be taken lightly.

She smoothed the sheets over his blanket and said lightly, 'That is true. But that is not important. There are other nurses.'

He looked at her beseechingly. Oh! she did not understand! And what an effort it was to put words together and explain his feelings! He had never been expressive and with Sarah he had had no need to be expressive.

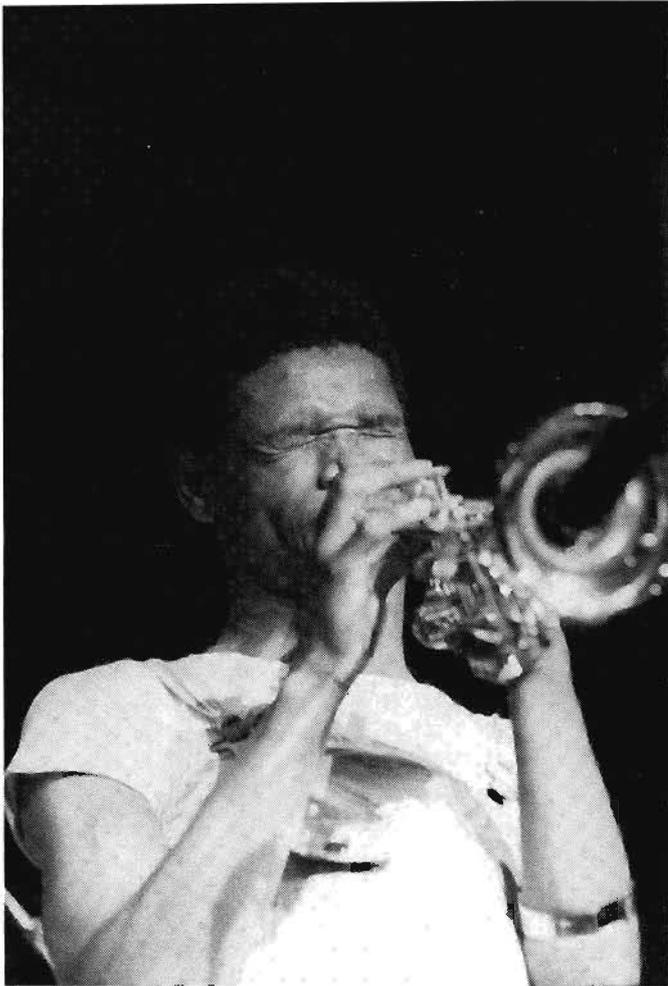
'There are many nurses, but they are not you,' he observed sadly. 'You are different.'

Mandy dismissed his remarks with a gay, but not unkind laugh.

'Oh you will feel differently then. You will get used to my absence and anyway, you will be gone before I get back,' she said reassuringly.

Jacob looked away. She just did not understand, he thought. How could he explain that he did not want her to leave? That he did not want her to go. How could he explain that he wanted her to stay with him always. How could he explain that he felt about her the way he had not felt about any woman since he had married Sarah? How could he explain that her sweetness reminded him of the sweetness of freshly flowing streams?

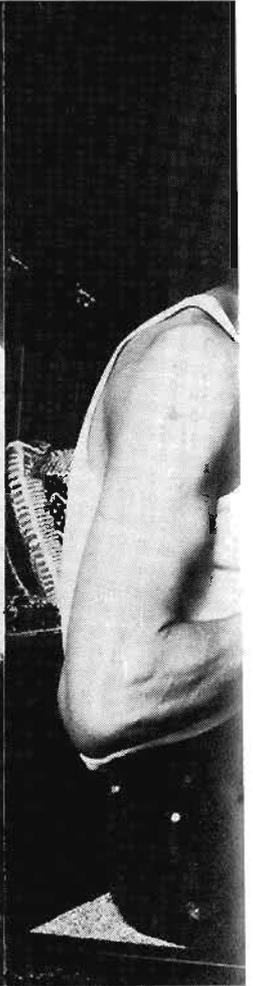
Her warmth was like the warmth of the sun in winter, gentle and welcome. He had not told her about Sarah and now as he looked at Mandy's clear sparkling eyes and youthful freshness, Sarah seemed muddy and common and memory of her and their life together in the Transkei receded to the back of his



*Peter Segone*



*NiiNoi Norty*



*Eugene Skeef*

# MAKIN

Photographs I

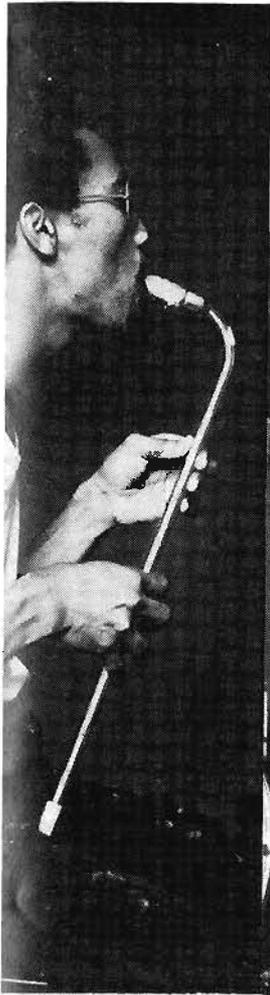


*Chris McGregor*



*Peggy Phango*

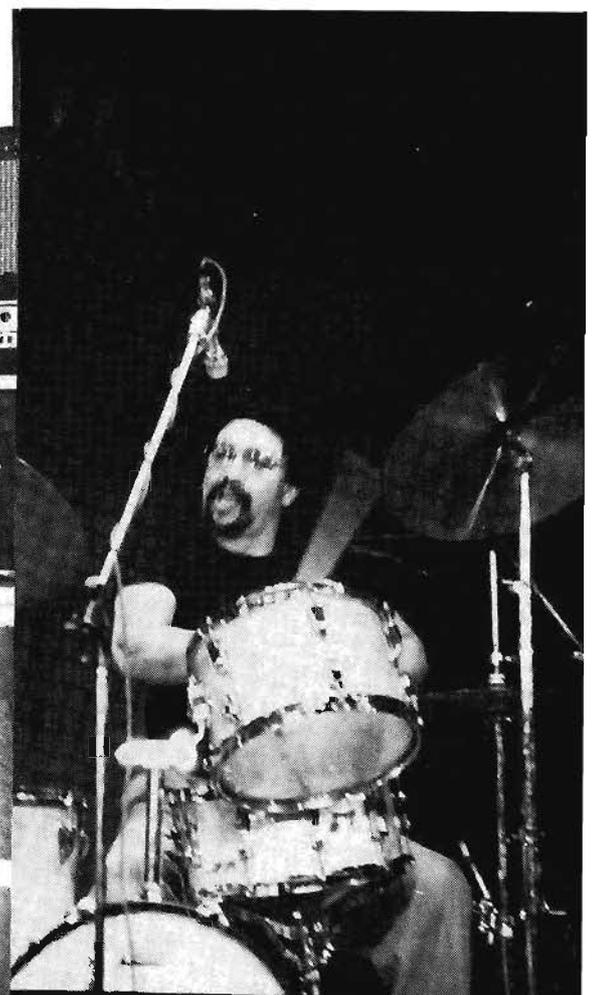
*Rehearsal at*



*Dudu Pukwana*



*Brain Abrahams*



# G MUSIC

**Jimi Matthews**



*tu's Place*

STAFFRIDER, VOL. 5 NO. 3, 1983



*Louis Moholo*



*Moss-Pula Arts Commune*

## Continued from page 23

mind. But how could he explain all this to Mandy?

Mandy watched him and was vaguely troubled. He did not have to explain for she understood more than she cared to admit. Although she chose deliberately to misunderstand, she knew that this was no ordinary patient-nurse attachment. And because she had chosen deliberately to misunderstand, she could not explain the real reason why she was eagerly looking forward to going on leave.

The rest of the week passed swiftly. As the day of Mandy's departure drew ever closer, Jacob grew more and more morose. He found it difficult to accept her going and his inability to communicate his feelings to her added to his unhappiness.

Mandy was aware of his mood. As she helped him with his daily bath and brought him his meals, she tried to pretend that nothing was different. She was careful to keep the conversation on a very impersonal level and she did her tasks as quickly as possible, managing to do so inconspicuously.

And then the day before her leave, he was discharged. As she listened to the doctor telling him the glad news, she

drew a long breath of relief. Now he would be gone and would forget. But when he looked at her and she saw the naked pain in his eyes, then she was not so glad and she turned away, vaguely disquieted.

She helped him get ready. He sat on the edge of the bed and his leg, encased in plaster, was stretched stiffly before him. He watched her dully as she packed his few belongings. His friend from the township was to take him home. He looked around the ward which had become so familiar to him, and at Mandy who had tended him for a month, and the prospect of returning to his job and his old way of life, aroused no enthusiasm in him.

As she folded his shirt, she felt something hard and knobby in the pocket. She withdrew it. It was the necklace of love beads. She held it in her hands for a long moment. A softness crept over her face as she read its loving message. The traditional love beads of the African people which spelt a woman's tenderness, trust and loyalty. Slowly, she looked up and met his eyes. He looked away quickly like some guilty child caught in the act of stealing.

'This is a love necklace,' she said softly.

'My wife made it for me,' he said slowly.

'She must love you very much,' observed Mandy.

She handed him the necklace and he took it wordlessly. He held it in his hands and as he fingered the beads, he remembered the woman who had so lovingly strung them together. Perhaps even now she was waiting for him to return, waiting so patiently. Yes, she was a good woman.

He looked up and found Mandy watching him questioningly. He smiled slowly.

'Yes, she does love me very much,' he answered with pride.

She was happy and relieved. She decided then that it was a good moment to tell him.

'It is a pity I live so far away. I'm getting married next week and it would be nice if you could come to the wedding,' she said quietly.

He sat there too stunned to speak. It was some while before the full implication of the news struck him. And when it did, he was suddenly glad to be going home to Sarah. He fingered the beads absently. Then he realised what an important link the beads were between his life in the city and his life in the Transkei. It was a link that was almost umbilical.

'Yes,' he said at last. 'It is a pity I cannot come to the wedding.'

## POETRY

D.P. Parenzee

### FIRE IN BONTEHEUWEL ON 17 JUNE 1980

The world smeared with smoke, bush  
road, clouds, burning  
tyre barricades and faces,  
gas masks, police vans.

Horizon imperceptible;  
black earth merged with black sky,  
all detail, geometry, all  
perspective is lost.

All but three vans, stopped  
doors flung wide, innards exposed;  
young animals in blue  
their young guns chattering.

A few scattered sounds  
swallowed in black and red —  
a few hundred bullets  
in smoke-blackened flesh

and blood.

This is the fire that has triggered nerves  
in the streets that map the land,

burning at every streetlamp,  
bristling at every fireplace.

Mattresses, old clothes, the guts of homes  
have been thrown out, have been  
contributed  
to the street-fires.

Uniformed in pyjamas,  
the ordinary people  
watch from windows and wonder  
maddens in their eyes.

Images grasped in the ghetto  
that they carry to their dreams;  
Tomorrow the children will see them  
as if freshly born

They'll swallow them like breakfast  
crisp as the morning news  
bright in primary reds,  
blacks and whites,  
hardened, everyone  
is being hardened  
by this fire that has warmed and killed  
bodies and fighters in tonight's brightness

The suburbs of Koosburg were very quiet. Even thieves preferred to lie warm in bed than to venture out into the midnight cold. All cops know this, but still they ride their nocturnal patrol with the same compulsion, however bad the night.

None of them was wearing identification numbers. They sat in the front cab of the patrol van packed in tightly across the seat like park-bench vagrants huddled together under sheets of newspaper. Cops, like uniforms, come in two sizes only. There were two big fleshy ones — one in a floppy green camouflage jacket, one in jeans and a sweater, and two small mean ones — a young one in a new, blue uniform, one old with glasses and a grey raincoat. They all had hard, steely police eyes and short spiky hair, shaved right up the back of their white necks, in accordance with police force regulations. To help against the winter chill of the night shift, they were sharing a bottle of cane spirits; though this was not in accordance with regulations. Also, in accordance with regulations they should have been wearing their numbers, but none of them was wearing identification numbers, just in case.

The suburbs of Koosburg were very quiet. Even thieves preferred to lie warm in bed than to venture out into the midnight cold. All cops know this, but still they ride their nocturnal patrol with the same compulsion, however bad the night. Even when the streets are deserted, they watch for traffic; even when the businesses are bankrupt and the premises vacant, they rattle the locks to check; they always keep their eyes open.

At exactly 1.30 am the patrol van pulled into a late-night roadhouse for food, as was their usual habit at that hour. The cops were the only customers in the parking lot; no-one else had been there since shortly before midnight when a travelling salesman had stopped for a coffee and directions. It was one of those empty nights, without a murmur of action to quicken the long minutes until dawn, and the cops knew it. They bought chips and toasted steaks which they got at half-price from the black waiter who ran the roadhouse. They ate the steaks first, chewing them slowly but hungrily, concentrating as they ate, and they passed the bottle of cane up and down along the line, washing down the rubbery meat and bread with sips of alcohol. Each cop was careful to wipe the mouth of the bottle from which his colleague had drunk, before he put it to his own lips. The cane made them all feel warm inside but

# NIGHT SHIFT

by Solomon Martins



Illustrated by Percy Sedumedi

At approximately ten minutes before two, the cops finished their meal and the black waiter closed the shutters of the roadhouse. The van moved out of the parking lot with a sudden screech of speed . . .

the chips were greasy and cold from lying in the soggy oil of the fryer all evening. They welcomed the food so late at night, however, for there would be nothing else for the cops to eat until morning. No-one spoke as they ate. The

only sound came from the crackling of the wireless as Radio Control called repeatedly for the Heelbrow and Piet Verster squads to respond, but they were obviously too busy to even hear the messages; there were always fights and robberies in the centre of the city at night. The cop in the camouflage jacket switched off the radio. They were not expecting any calls.

At approximately ten minutes before two, the cops finished their meal and the black waiter closed the shutters of the roadhouse. The van moved out of the parking lot with a sudden screech of

speed, as if the cops had something urgent to perform, but they only returned to their general aimless patrol through the tranquil suburbs. For fun, the driver switched on the flashing blue light so that it threw eerie shadows on the trees along the road, lighting them up momentarily like ghosts jumping out of the darkness. There was no other movement in the entire district.

Houses, shops and schools were lifeless. Everyone was asleep. Familiar cars were parked in familiar places down driveways, on the side of the road, on pavements — exactly where they had been parked the previous night, and the night before that and before. Nothing was disturbed, nothing was strange. It was one of those empty nights.

Once, they thought they saw a light burning in a place which should have been dark. But it was only the reflection of the streetlamps shining on the scout-house windows, and they did not even stop to investigate.

Then the cops came upon an unfamiliar car parked oddly among the swings and jungle gyms of a children's playground. Though none of them had ever seen the car before, the cops recognised it instantly, instinctively. You do not have to be a cop for very long before you know why someone tries to hide a car between swings and jungle gyms.

There are only two possible explanations. The car could have been a stolen vehicle which had been dumped. But it was not. They could easily see that it was not stolen without even having to check their list of registrations. It was not dirty enough; it was not damaged; there were no scratches on the paint or broken windows or any signs of forced entry. That left only one possible explanation.

---

**The burly old cop switched off the headlamps and rode slowly and noiselessly onto the lawn, edging warily forward to where the car was parked.**

---

The cops smirked.

'We'll have some action now,' said the small old cop, nudging the small young cop beside him.

'That's what I joined the force for,' grinned the young one.

'I was just starting to get bored,' said the one in the sweater, tilting a large swig of cane down his throat, 'Maybe now the night will go quicker.' He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. The small young one began to say something but the burly old cop who was driving the van, interrupted him: 'Don't make another sound,' he ordered, 'I'll get the van close to the car and turn on the spots. Everyone keep still. For all we

know, we might have caught a terrorist.'

The burly old cop switched off the headlamps and rode slowly and noiselessly onto the lawn, edging warily forward to where the car was parked. There was no movement from inside the sedan as they got nearer, and the two younger cops wondered if, in fact, they would find the car abandoned and dull. But the older cops knew better, and they both warned the other two to be quiet, and to wait.

When the bright lights came on, the four cops saw a man and a woman kissing. They were not young. Both were naked from the waist up. The man, it seemed, had been fondling the woman's breasts.

---

**The cop in the raincoat nodded. 'I don't know why else they are sitting here in secret.'**

'Unless it's a coloured,' said the driver, 'But you all say it's a white girl.'

---

The cops sat where they were, facing the couple, without uttering a word.

The man in the car sat straight up in his seat and blinked fiercely into the dazzling lights of the patrol van. He swore and bit his lip in anger. The woman looked away and covered her breasts with her arms, criss-crossed about her. She began to shiver, though her cheeks were hot with embarrassment.

The big young cop remarked to his companions that the woman had a pretty pair of lungs. The small young cop giggled and grabbed the bottle of alcohol from his partner, but the two older ones did not take their attention from the couple.

The man searched on the floor of the car for his shirt. It was stuck under the accelerator pedal, and, as he grabbed it hastily to dress himself, he tore the pocket. He swore again but he slipped his shirt on without buttoning it, without taking his gaze off the watching policemen.

The woman said, 'Oh really, they're bloody ridiculous.'

The burly old cop wondered aloud, 'Is it a white woman or a coloured?'

White,' chirped the two young ones.

'Husband doesn't know where she is,' suggested the cop in the grey raincoat.

'Or his wife doesn't know,' said the driver, 'At least one of them is married.'

The cop in the raincoat nodded. 'I don't know why else they are sitting here in secret.'

'Unless it's a coloured,' said the driver, 'but you all say it's a white girl.'

'White woman,' said the small young cop, looking at her long, wavy hair.

The man in the car said to the woman, 'I'll try to get rid of them.' He

swung open the door of the sedan and strode briskly across the lawn to the police van. The four cops jumped out of the van immediately and waited for him on the damp grass. The woman pulled on her jersey.

'Haven't you chaps got anything better to do?' the man demanded as he approached the policemen. To his added frustration, they didn't answer. The two young ones smiled to themselves; the older ones stared at the man coldly.

'Is this how you get your kicks then?' he continued, his face reddening, 'Is this your little piece of action for the night? I mean, Jesus, this is a bit pathetic. Peeping. I think this is a bit much. Just a little bit too bloody much.'

The big young cop in the jeans and sweater clenched his fists and stepped closer to the angry man. But the small old cop held out his arm to prevent the younger one from taking another step. No-one said anything for a tense moment, and the woman pressed the hooter so that they all looked around in sudden fright. The man turned and hurried back to the car, running on his bare toes across the wet ground like a ballet dancer.

---

**'I want your numbers,' he said furiously, looking at their chests where the numbers should have been. 'Why aren't you wearing numbers? I want to report this disgusting behaviour. Where are your bloody numbers?'**

---

The small old cop said to the others 'Don't do anything yet. We haven't got proper legal rights. He hasn't committed any crime yet.'

'But he's shunting another man's wife,' the big young cop burst out disdainfully.

'We don't know that for sure,' said the big old cop.

'He was all sticky with her sweat,' the younger cop protested indignantly. 'He must have had his fingers right up her engine.'

'I mean we don't even know if they're not married,' explained the older one, 'For all we know, this could be their honeymoon night.'

'Yes, but his hot little hands were . . .'

'I said don't do anything yet,' hissed the small old cop, glaring at the young one. 'Did you hear me?'

The two young cops nodded reluctantly.

The cop in the camouflage jacket said: 'For all we know, he could be a lawyer.'

The man came back to the cops with a scrap of paper and a ballpoint in his hands. His shirt was buttoned now, but his pocket was flapping ludicrously where he had torn it.

'I want your numbers,' he said furiously, looking at their chests where the numbers should have been. 'Why aren't you wearing numbers? I want to report this disgusting behaviour. Where are your bloody numbers?'

'I think you'd better watch what you say, sir,' snapped the small old cop. 'You are in the presence of four officers of the law.'

The man snorted. 'You call yourselves policemen? You're a bunch of bloody perverted thugs, that's what you are. A bunch of thugs. And I'm going to make sure you get reported. Now, what are your damn numbers?'

'You'd better be careful, sir.'

'You'd better be careful, mate. You started with the wrong person tonight. I'm not finished with you. Barging into other people's privacy, who do you think you are? Just who do you think you are? You're a bunch of pigs. Dirty, slimy, sick, perverted pigs. I'm going to make sure you get what's coming to you. Why aren't you wearing identification numbers?'

'What's it to you?' the big young cop blurted out.

The man glanced at him contemptuously and then walked to the front of the patrol van. He wrote down the registration number of the van and turned back to the cops, saying in a

calmer voice: 'I am a personal friend of the Chief of Police. I expect he'll have a few things to say to the four of you tomorrow morning.'

He walked stiffly back to his car and told the woman what had happened. The cops could see her laughing. But this did not worry them. The man suggested to the woman that they return to her flat. But the cops knew differently.

They watched him start up his car and drive off down the road.

'What's the time?' asked the cop in the raincoat.

'Quarter to three,' replied one of the younger ones.

'Reasonable suspicion?' asked the burly old cop.

The small old cop nodded. 'Quick,' he ordered. 'Into the van. We've got him now.'

**The small young cop, who was the first one out of the van, ran up to the car in his shiny uniform, pulled open the door and tapped the man on the shoulder, announcing with glee: 'You are under arrest, mister!'**

And with the energy which they had been storing up all night, the four cops leaped into the patrol van and sped

down the road after their quarry, with the blue light of the van flashing wildly, the siren howling ecstatically and their tyres screaming.

As they got close behind him, they signalled to the man to pull over to the side of the road. He was forced to obey them.

The small young cop, who was the first one out of the van, ran up to the car in his shiny uniform, pulled open the door and tapped the man on the shoulder, announcing with glee: 'You are under arrest, mister!'

'For what crime?' the man protested.

The cop replied smugly: 'Drunken driving.'

'I don't believe it,' the victim wailed. 'I've only had one bloody beer the whole night.'

'That's what you say,' he retorted, trembling with excitement. 'I can smell a whole bottle store on your breath. You have to have tests.'

The man went white with horror as he began to understand what was happening. Like monsters from a nightmare, the rest of the crew came strutting.

A smile crossed the big old cop's face. 'Get out of the car, you dirty slime,' he commanded, jerking the helpless man by the lapels. 'You are spending the night with us!'



# \*Special offer on \*For September and October 1983 only AFRICAN WRITERS TITLES!

- |                                     |                        |                 |       |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Efuru                  | Flora Nwapa     | R3,50 |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | The Voice              | Gabriel Okara   | R3,75 |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | The Money Order        | Sembene Ousmane | R4,25 |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | The Joys of Motherhood | Buchi Emecheta  | R4,75 |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | No Longer At Ease      | Chinua Achebe   | R3,50 |

Please send one of each of the books ticked to:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I enclose the total amount of R \_\_\_\_\_

Please note: No C.O.D. orders and no deposits

Send this coupon to: African Writers Book Offer, PO Box 11350 Johannesburg 2000

**TOO MUCH ENERGY IN US DESTROYS**

*To F. Mzoma*

I

Too much energy destroys us and others  
and too little of it  
drives lambs from their homes  
running away from lionine neighbours  
To come back certainly  
lambs turned into lions  
storming their canine neighbours for survival.

II

You see my ancestors once feared and revered mountains:  
The pithy heart of the mass of rock, trees, streams  
Had more than ordinary power, they said. And every once in a  
long while  
Napolo, that huge water snake from the caves of the mountain  
Fuelled by the punitive spirits of our forefathers  
Stormed down a century of wrongdoing  
relentlessly in the plains below. These days of course  
Mountains are mere mountains  
Sins committed reach no further  
than the tallest house.  
We've tucked justice under our very own armpits.  
The energy is ours, the power ours  
We can do anything  
Without fearing a landslide, exploding rocks  
Or lakes of water, sweeping the jacaranda and acacia incensed  
City in the plains  
Down to the sea.

*excerpt from 'HELLO LEROI JONES, THE PEOPLE ONLY  
PICK TEA HERE'*

**KUCHITSA FOUNTAIN, BANGWE LOCATION,  
BLANTYRE**

In this slum valley stripped of all ancient superstition  
We stand around this tree stump  
Black with age, like a hurried ebony curio  
hawked in the streets of Blantyre,  
Pointing at the dry season sky  
And whose top oozes with water as economical as forced tears  
Which these Bangwe women  
Have been drawing for years. They call it KUCHITSA  
FOUNTAIN

A man must have cut the tree away. Today it is  
a new superstition with versions and versions  
About its origin and cause.  
Here even newspaper writers stop asking clever  
Questions about politics and sports.  
Here women have gossiped and fought  
their utensils clattering in dismay many times.  
But today no-one listens  
To the bald headed man and the bespectacled boy  
Who talk and agree with each other about capillary action  
and atmospheric pressure as everyone  
(Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus . . . )  
In search of modern myth  
Prefers the mystic version of the origin of this tree-stump-tap.

This bored Bangwe woman, small and thin  
Reeking of dry gin and tobacco

Tired of questions for eight years  
Perhaps gives a true explanation  
To a precocious boy's question about the genesis  
Of his curious spring when she says  
All she knows is that the way the water drops from the stump  
Into their pails is like an elderly man taking a pee.

**MULANJE MORNING**

*For S. Namagoa*

The green waveless sea of tea steams  
Fuming at the languid sky  
As the morning sun  
Crimson hell  
Like a balloon  
Hangs hesitant  
On the bald

Craggy

Mountain  
Whose baobab body  
gushes with streams of tears  
over centuries of pain —

The last cock has crowed —

And in the gnawed yellow paths  
Betrayed, half nude women,  
Muddy hoes in sallow hands,  
Fight against age writhing  
Towards MINIMINI, CHITAKALE  
And LANDALADE (incorporated in England) TEA ESTATES  
Swiftly diminishing their last years  
With the quest for survival.

**THE WORLD UNFREE IS A DESERT**

*For YASSIR 'ABU AMMAR' ARAFAT Aug. '82*

In that last line of oasis palms  
Retreating from the deadly glare of the sun  
Is an old Bedouin on a camel  
eyes fixed on the horizon  
In this brown sea of sand —

Every once in a while  
There's a cloud of dust.

Then silence

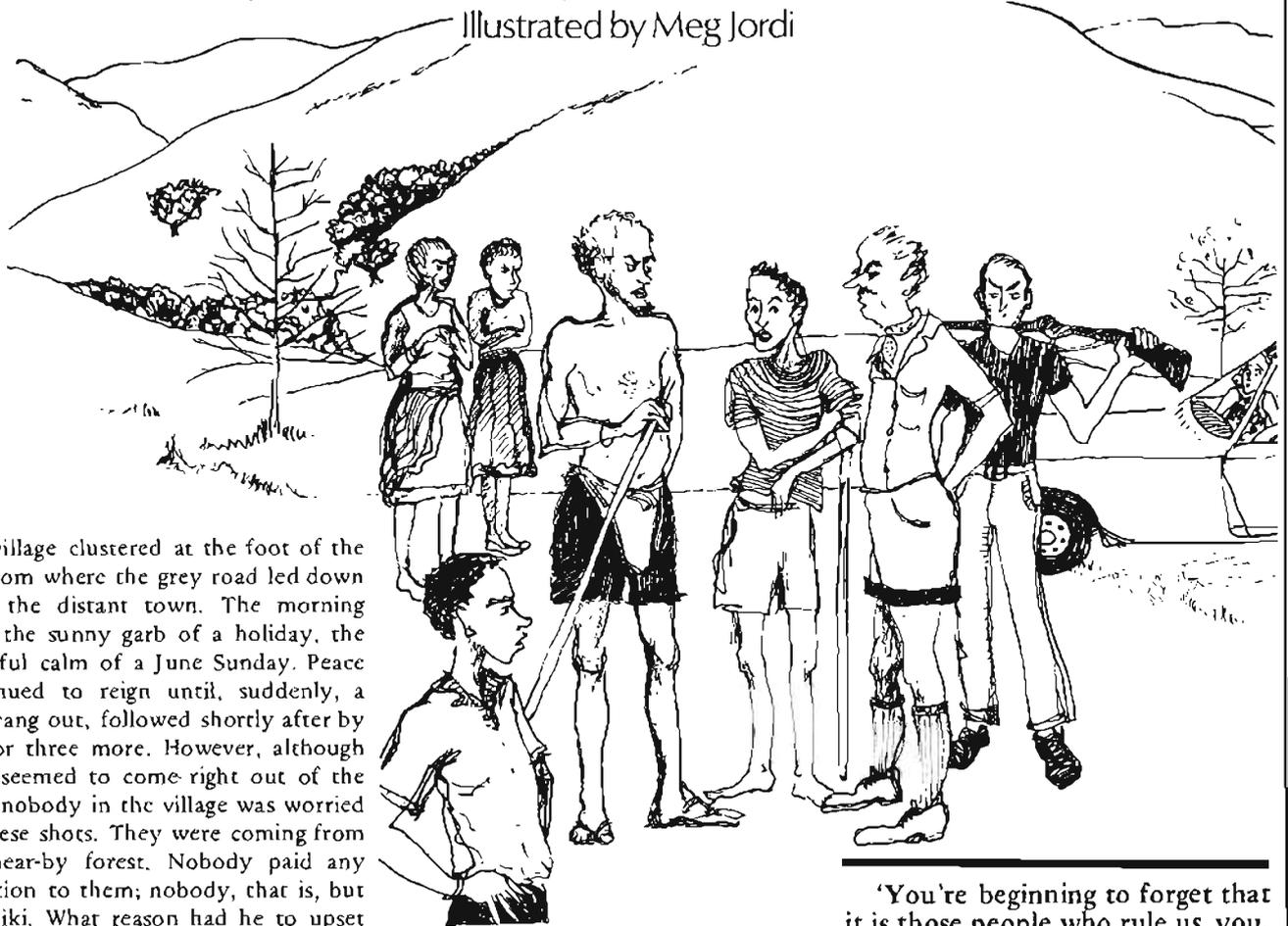
and unbearded young men flee the tremulous heat  
the ground vibrating under their feet  
in these endless burning sands of their lives and times  
littered with the unrecorded bones of their fathers

and this Bedouin leaves his camel  
To take them into his heart  
his heart the oasis of hope  
For generations pacing this endless  
expanse of boiling seas of sands  
seeking sanctuary  
pursued by a pride of desert lions.

# THE MONKEYS

An excerpt from the novel, 'Agatha Moudio's Son' by Francis Bebey

Illustrated by Meg Jordi



Our village clustered at the foot of the hill from where the grey road led down from the distant town. The morning wore the sunny garb of a holiday, the peaceful calm of a June Sunday. Peace continued to reign until, suddenly, a shot rang out, followed shortly after by two or three more. However, although they seemed to come right out of the blue, nobody in the village was worried by these shots. They were coming from the near-by forest. Nobody paid any attention to them; nobody, that is, but Moudiki. What reason had he to upset himself on account of these shots fired far from our village when the other villagers remained utterly indifferent to them?

The two men looked at each other in silence for a moment, each one thinking things over for himself. Finally, Moudiki made up his mind.

Moudiki came in.

'You heard them arrive, Mbaka?' he asked, closing the door behind him. 'You heard their car arrive?'

'Certainly I heard them arrive. Do you think I'm deaf? I even heard two or three of their shots a moment ago. They are already hunting. Ekéké is with them, I suppose?'

'Yes, Ekéké is with them,' replied Moudiki.

Then he fell silent. He still had something else to say but he was reluctant to speak. It was a bit tricky, the kind of question he wanted to ask. The two men looked at each other in silence for a moment, each one thinking things over for himself. Finally, Moudiki made up his mind:

'All the same there's something that bothers me, Mbaka,' he said.

'Something bothering you? What is it?'

'Listen, Mbaka, you are the Chief of our village, the Chief of us all. You mustn't deceive us. I have come to ask you what the position is about those people.'

'What, the position about those people? What do you mean? I don't understand you.'

'What I mean to say, what I mean is . . . tell me: if I put the question frankly, you won't get angry?'

'Why should I get angry?'

Mbaka was more and more intrigued. It must be something serious. Why should Moudiki come and see him this Sunday morning and suddenly behave in such a mysterious and guarded manner, when ordinarily he was the very personification of straightforwardness and good spirits?

'No, I won't get angry. Ask your question, I'll answer you . . . if it's possible to answer,' said Chief Mbaka.

'Very well then, here goes: tell me, these whites who come hunting in our area, have they given you anything?'

'You're beginning to forget that it is those people who rule us, you, me, all the villagers, just as they rule our forest, our stream, our river, and all the animals and fish that live in them. Then you tell me how you would go about asking people like that to pay you money, just because they go hunting in the forest?'

'Given me anything? How do you mean?'

'Yes, you know what I mean: have they given you compensation?'

'Compensation? How?'

'If I've got it right,' insisted Moudiki, 'haven't they given you a little . . . you know, a little money?'

'Money? Really, sometimes you talk as if you didn't want people to understand you: what money? What for?'

'Chief Mbaka, I have always thought that you were a bit lacking in common sense, but this time, I'm sure I'm right. I'll explain what I mean: those people, they don't belong around here; they're strangers. If they come hunting here, we can't let them do it free of charge. They ought to pay something, and you know, they . . .'

**Don't forget that you are the Chief: you shouldn't be afraid of whites.**

'I'm interrupting, Moudiki, because there's one thing you're beginning to forget, with your common sense. You're beginning to forget that it is those people who rule us, you, me, all the villagers, just as they rule our forest, our stream, our river, and all the animals and fish that live in them. Then you tell me how you would go about asking people like that to pay you money, just because they go hunting in the forest?'

'That's true, Mbaka, and I've thought about it as well. But they are the people who invented money. They manufacture it. They have plenty for themselves. So they must have some to spare for us too . . . I . . . mean: to offer us a little, out of friendship, at least to give us the impression that they like to come hunting here. Don't you think it would be reasonable . . . and fair, to suggest that they should give us a little present from time to time? For all of us, Mbaka, not just for me. You are the chief and you ought to think of that, for the sake of your people. I repeat that it's not just for myself but for all of us.'

Mbaka went and sat on an old chair, near the window, put his head in his hands and began to think. Why, oh why had he not thought of his people since the whites had started to come hunting in our forest? In his heart of hearts Mbaka acknowledged the justice of Moudiki's proposal.

'Yes, you're right,' he said finally. 'You're perfectly right, Moudiki. These people can't come hunting here like that without ever giving us anything.'

'You say "anything", but I mean "money",' corrected Moudiki. 'You must speak to them about it this very day. And if they refuse, you can tell them not to come hunting monkeys in our district any more. Don't forget that you are the Chief: you shouldn't be afraid of whites.'

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, Ekéké indicated the path leading out of the wood. All the village children were waiting for the hunters on the edge of the wood, and they went with them as far as their car. This had become the custom.

Moudiki was the kind of man who knows how to bring pressure to bear by using arguments. Mbaka was very well acquainted with this aggressive type. He was well aware that Moudiki didn't often have really brilliant ideas, but that when he did happen to have one, nothing would persuade him to give it

up, no matter what risks might be involved in putting it into practice. However, unlike the other times when he had fought tooth and nail to oppose Moudiki's proposals, it was not from a desire to please his morning visitor that today Mbaka admitted that Moudiki was right: he really thought so. Money was important. He would talk to the whites about it, all the more readily because the other inhabitants of the village would hold it against him terribly if one day they learned that he, their Chief, had been afraid to ask the hunters to compensate the community.

'All right,' said the Chief, 'I'll go and see them this very day, and I'll ask them for money.'

At this, Moudiki went back home again, congratulating himself on his initiative. Then the village continued to remain calm, as on any sunny Sunday morning.

**Mbaka arrived without taking the time to fasten his cloth firmly round his loins. He must hurry, for the hunters were hungry. Nothing like a monkey-hunt to make you hungry.**

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, Ekéké indicated the path leading out of the wood. All the village children were waiting for the hunters on the edge of the wood, and they went with them as far as their car. This had become the custom: every Sunday, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the children of Bonakwan, their numbers swollen by the children of the neighbouring village of Banakamé, greeted the whites who had come from the town for their weekly hunting party. That day St Hubert had been particularly well-disposed. The hunters were about to get into their car, satisfied with their day, and happy to see the children of our district so happy with their visit, when Moudiki approached Ekéké:

'Tell your whites that Chief Mbaka has something to ask them.'

Ekéké translated into French, and the whites understood that the Chief wanted to see them.

'Why does he want to see us?' asked one of them.

'I don't know,' replied Ekéké. How could he know?

'Very well, let him come here, the Chief, let him come here, if he wants to see us. But do tell him to hurry, because we're rather anxious to get home now. We're beginning to feel hungry.'

It was quite clear that they had no wish to waste their time. They looked at their watches several times. The Chief wants to see us . . . very well, he'll have to hurry.

Mbaka arrived without taking the

time to fasten his cloth firmly round his loins. He must hurry, for the hunters were hungry. Nothing like a monkey-hunt to make you hungry. Moudiki knew this very well, but he also thought that the whites had no right to feel hungry unless they behaved properly towards us.

'Why do you want to see us, Chief?'

'To ask you for a little present for our village.'

'A little present? What does that mean?'

There were three white men and their two white women. We had often wondered, in the village, how three white men could be the husbands of two white women, but these people had their own way of life, so different from ours . . . And then, the two ladies always wore trousers: what kind of woman was this . . . ? One of the men was very rich, at least we thought so every time he opened his mouth to speak, for he had replaced the two rows of ivory that heaven must surely have given him at birth, with two sparkling rows of gold. He was tall and strong and ugly. What a strange man, we said among ourselves: and, in addition to all that, he had so much gold that he didn't know what to do with it, and was prepared to waste it by changing it into teeth. What a strange man.

The two ladies got into the car and began to wave fans with designs of many colours. The children were looking at these men and these women with curiosity and admiration; especially the man with the gold-filled mouth, in spite of his strange ugliness. But why on earth weren't they black, like us?

'A little present? What does that mean?' asked one of them. He didn't understand.

'It means a little money,' said Mbaka cupping his hand.

'What is he talking about?' asked another white. 'He wants to make us pay for his monkeys now? What's more, I say "his monkeys" as if they belonged to him . . .'

'What do you want it for, this money?'

'To buy a little salt for all the people of our village, to make sure the monkeys are still alive in the forest when you come back next time.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

The request seemed so unwarranted to the hunter that he thought for a moment that my cousin Ekéké must have been mistranslating into French what Chief Mbaka was saying in his native tongue. But it was exactly what the Chief was saying. In any case, what

was so incomprehensible about it?

'What is he talking about?' asked another white. 'He wants to make us pay for his monkeys now? What's more, I say "his monkeys" as if they belonged to him. He wants to make us pay for monkeys that we have caught ourselves, and which are of no use to us?'

Each one of us, naturally, was wondering what they did with all the monkeys that they came and killed in our forest. In our village nobody used this breed of animal with a human head, for food. But we were convinced that for them, on the other hand, it was a delicacy. In any case, why were they hungry at this time of day? Simply because they had not yet eaten, that was clear. And why had they not yet eaten? Because they were waiting to eat until they got back from hunting. So you tell me: what were they going to do when they got home? Leave these monkeys plucked from the trees in the most overpowering tropical heat to rot on the rubbish-heap? What a likely tale!

**Our visitors thought they were dealing with savages. They were mistaken, for, in the outlying suburbs of Douala, we were the descendants of Bilé son of Bessengué . . .**

The whole village had arrived in the square, having heard that the Chief had something to say to the whites. When a Chief has something to say, it's an event; for his prestige is at stake. Mbaka had come to the meeting with the white hunters well aware that if his plan failed he would have to shut himself up in his house for several days, and that he could no longer expect to be obeyed, or to get an order of any kind carried out. What demon had inspired Moudiki to suggest this meeting, then, Mbaka wondered. At all events, now that everybody was gathered round the car, surrounding the strangers to the village, the Chief could no longer draw back. Moreover, as they had come in such numbers, Mbaka knew that his people all intended to support him, since he was making the request for the good of the whole community.

'What's this all about?'

'It's about salt, sir,' replied Mbaka.

Our visitors thought they were dealing with savages. They were mistaken, for, in the outlying suburbs of Douala, we were the descendants of Bilé, son of Bessengué, the man who had once astonished all the tribes of Douala by his unrivalled riches, and who reigned over the tribe of the Akwas 'for centuries', even after his death. We could not therefore be afraid of whites, even if they carried guns. This was what

I was thinking when, furious at having been held up by a tale of cooking salt, about which he refused to understand anything, one of the hunters said to Mbaka, rudely:

**I elbowed my way through the assembled crowd and stationed myself in front of the three white men. They looked at me and found they were looking at a stone wall. But their surprise seemed to stem above all from the fact that probably for the first time in their lives an African villager had dared to address them in this precise and aggressive manner.**

'You won't get it, the salt for your tribe. We owe you nothing. We come here to hunt monkeys, which belong to nobody. What's more, without us and our guns the colony of monkeys in your forest would cause you plenty of trouble, even in your village. We are benefactors, and it's you, in fact, who should consider paying us something, instead of wasting our time when we're hungry . . .'

At this point I intervened.

'We're wasting your time? Perhaps you think that because you carry guns we shall be afraid to ask you for compensation if you come hunting in our forest. Well, I assure you that you won't leave here with these monkeys, unless you do as Chief Mbaka asks . . . Ekéké, translate what I have just said for them.'

I elbowed my way through the assembled crowd and stationed myself in front of the three white men. They looked at me and found they were looking at a stone wall. But their surprise seemed to stem above all from the fact that probably for the first time in their lives an African villager had dared to address them in this precise and aggressive manner. I had to force myself to hide my pleasure when I saw how greatly impressed they were not only by my build, but still more by the terms in which I had spoken to them. All the inhabitants of the village were proud of me. Just think: for them I represented times long since vanished in the dark night of ages and of injustice. I was a true son of Bilé son of Bessengué. I was the son of this village, which could count quite a few glorious exploits in its history. In any case, for the past three or four years everybody's eyes had been fixed on me: the wrestling bouts against the surrounding villages had given me a chance to show off my muscular strength, and I was in the process of gradually becoming a legend, just like the great wrestlers of our people who had gone before.

Then the white hunters looked at

each other, as if for guidance, without saying a word. But they were hungry, and that cut short all the rest. One after another, they raised their hats to me, then awkwardly, put their hands in their pockets, and brought out . . . yes indeed, genuine coins. And they gave them to me and I handed them to Chief Mbaka. No need to tell you of my pride in this moment of glory.

Then, one of the whites, suddenly remembering that he could write, took a notebook out of some pocket or other about his person and asked who I was. Now my cousin Ekéké worked on a very laudable principle; when he was interpreting for the village, he translated everything that was said to him, the lot, including proper names. So, when I replied that my name was Mbenda, my cousin seized the opportunity to show his zeal:

'He is called the Law,' he said.

'What did you say?' I asked my cousin. 'What did you tell the white man? Repeat what you have just told him about my name.'

'I told him you are called the Law,' he answered; 'that is what Mbenda means in French.'

Ekéké must have been right, for the man he was speaking to began again immediately, talking to me:

'That's right, the Law, that's right, that's the way . . . You'll be hearing from me.'

That is how the name stuck, for everybody in our village immediately found himself richer for a new word, and moreover, a French word: *La Loi*.

As for the man's last remark, spoken in such friendly tones, all my family immediately thought that I should certainly be offered a job in the town. And off they went swollen with envy, saying that I was the luckiest child of the village. People will reason like this . . . They couldn't even see how much I disliked the idea of giving up my happy life as a fisherman, in order to wear trousers, a shirt and a tie. At all events, the supposedly happy outcome foreseen by my prophetic brothers failed to materialize. In fact, a week after this day full of cooking salt and promises for the future, we had a visit, unexpected, to say the least, from M. Dubous, Commissioner of Police for Douala. If I had had the spirit to go out to sea fishing on that day, I should no doubt have avoided many complications. I don't understand why I was lazy and stayed in the village. I didn't put out to sea and I gained fifteen days' detention in the prison at New Bell. Fifteen days' detention, without trial, for having dared to ask for money for the cooking salt needed by our community. This was the rate at the time. The law had so ordained.

# THE TEST

by  
Njabulo S. Ndebele



As he felt the first drops of rain on his bare arms, Thoba wondered if he should run home quickly before there was a downpour. He shivered briefly, and his teeth chattered for a moment as a cold breeze blew and then stopped. How cold it had become, he thought. He watched the other boys who seemed completely absorbed in the game. They felt no rain, and no cold. He watched. The boys of Mayaba Street had divided themselves into two soccer teams. That was how they spent most days of their school vacations: playing soccer in the street. No, decided Thoba, he would play on. Besides, his team was winning. He looked up at the sky and sniffed, remembering that some grown-ups would say one can tell if it is going to rain by sniffing at the sky the way dogs do. He was not sure if he could smell anything other than the dust raised by the soccer players around him. He could tell though, that the sky, having been overcast for some time, had grown darker.

Should I? he thought. Should I go home? But the ball decided for him when it came his way accidentally, and he was suddenly swept into the action as he dribbled his way past one fellow. But the next fellow took the ball away from him, and Thoba gave it up without a struggle. It had been a quick thrill. He

had felt no rain, no cold. The trick is to keep playing and be involved, he thought. But he stopped, and looked at the swarm of boys chasing after the tennis ball in a swift chaotic movement away from him, like a whirlwind. They were all oblivious of the early warnings of rain. He did not follow them, feeling no inclination to do so. He felt uncertain whether he was tired or whether it was the fear of rain and cold that had taken his interest away from the game. He looked down at his arms. There they were; tiny drops of rain, some sitting on goose pimples, others between them. Fly's sputum, he thought.

---

**Thoba rubbed his arms vigorously, making it too obvious that he was shamming a preoccupation with keeping warm in order to avoid answering Simangele's question. But Vusi did not fear Simangele.**

---

Soon there was a loud yell. Some boys were jumping into the air, others shaking their fists, others dancing in all sorts of ways. Some, with a determined look on their faces, trotted back to the centre, their small thumbs raised, to wait for the ball to be thrown in again. Someone had scored for Thoba's team.

The scorer was raised into the air. It was Vusi. But Vusi's triumph was short lived for it was just at that moment that the full might of the rain came. Vusi disappeared from the sky like a mole reversing into its hole. The boys of Mayaba Street scattered home, abandoning their match. The goal posts on either side disappeared when the owners of the shoes repossessed them. Thoba began to run home, hesitated, changing direction to follow a little group of boys towards the shelter of the walled veranda of Simangele's home.

Thoba found only Simangele, Vusi, Mpiyakhe, and Nana on the veranda. He was disappointed. In the rush it had seemed as if more boys had gone there. Perhaps he really should have run home, he thought. Too late, though. He was there now, at the veranda of Simangele's home, breathing hard like the others from the short impulsive sprint away from the rain. They were all trying to get the rain water off them: kicking it off their legs, or pushing it down their arms with their fingers, the way wind-screen wipers do. Simangele wiped so hard that it looked as if he was rubbing the water into his skin. Only Vusi, who had scored the last goal, was not wiping off the water on him. There was an angry scowl on his face as he slowly massaged his buttocks, all the

while cursing:

'The bastards,' he said. 'The bastards! They just dropped me. They let go of me like a bag of potatoes. I'll get them for that. One by one. I'll get them one by one.'

'What if you *are* a bag of potatoes?' said Simangele laughing. 'What do you think, fellows?' He was jumping up and down like a grown-up soccer player warming up just before the beginning of a game. He shadow boxed briefly then jumped up and down again.

Simangele got no response from the others. It would have been risky for them to take sides. Thoba rubbed his arms vigorously, making it too obvious that he was shamming a preoccupation with keeping warm in order to avoid answering Simangele's question. But Vusi did not fear Simangele.

'This is not a laughing matter,' he said.

'Then don't make me laugh,' replied Simangele, shadow boxing with slow easy sweeps of his arms.

Vusi uttered a click of annoyance and looked away from Simangele. He continued to massage his buttocks.

Simangele looked at Vusi for a while, and then turned away to look at Nana.

'Are you warm?' he asked, suddenly looking gentle.

Nana, who was noticeably shivering, sniffed back mucus and nodded.

'Perhaps you should sit there at the corner,' said Simangele.

Thoba looked at Nana and felt vaguely jealous that Nana should receive such special attention from Simangele. But then Nana always received special attention. This thought made Thoba yearn for the security of his home. He began to feel anxious and guilty that he had not run home. Not only did he feel he did not matter to Simangele and Vusi, he also feared the possibility of a fight between these two. Quarrels made him uneasy. Always. What would his mother say if he was injured in a fight? Rather, wouldn't she be pleased to hear that he had run home as soon as the rain started? The rain. Yes, the rain. He looked at it, and it seemed ominous with its steady strength, as if it would go on raining for ever, making it impossible for him to get home before his mother. And how cold it was now! Should he? Should he run home? No. There was too much rain out there. Somewhat anxiously, he looked at the others, and tried to control his shivering.

The other three boys were looking at Nana huddling himself at the corner where the house and the veranda walls met. He looked frailer than ever, as if there was a disease eating at him all the time. Thoba wished he had a coat to put over Nana. But Nana seemed warm, for he had embraced his legs and buried

his head between his raised knees. The only sound that came from him was a continuous sniff as he drew back watery mucus, occasionally swallowing it. Thoba wondered if Nana's grandmother was home. Or did the rain catch her far in the open fields away from the township, where it was said she dug all over for roots and herbs? She was always away looking for roots to heal people with. And when she was away, Nana was cared for by everyone in Mayaba Street. Thoba looked at Nana and wished that he himself was as lucky.

Just then, Mpiyakhe turned round like a dog wanting to sit, and sat down about a foot from Nana. He began to put his shoes on. Mpiyakhe's shoes had been one of the two pairs that had been used as goal posts. Thoba looked at Mpiyakhe's feet as Mpiyakhe slipped them into socks first, and noticed how smooth those feet were compared to Nana's which were deeply cracked. Then he looked at Vusi's and Simangele's feet. Theirs too were cracked. His were not. They were as smooth as Mpiyakhe's. Thoba remembered that he had three pairs of shoes, and his mother had always told him to count his blessings because most boys had only one pair, if any shoes at all, for both school and special occasions like going to church. Yet Thoba yearned to have cracked feet too. So whenever his mother and father were away from home, he would go out and play without his shoes. But Mpiyakhe never failed to wear his shoes. Perhaps that was why Mpiyakhe's shoes were always being used as goal posts. They were always available.

Soon, Thoba, Mpiyakhe, Vusi and Simangele stood in a row along the low wall of the veranda, looking at the rain, and talking and laughing. The anxiety over a possible fight had disappeared, and Thoba felt contented as he nestled himself into the company of these daring ones who had not run home when the rain started. And it no longer mattered to him that his mother has often said to him: 'Always run home as soon as it begins to rain. I will not nurse a child who has said to illness "Come on, friend, let's hold hands and dance."' Never! And Thoba would always wonder how a boy could hold hands with a disease. He must ask his uncle next time he came to visit.

For the moment, Thoba was glad that there was nobody at home. His mother was on day duty at the Dunnotar Hospital, and, although it was the December vacation, his father still went to school saying there was too much preparation to be done.

'You ought to take a rest, Father,' Thoba's mother had said on the last Sunday of the school term. The two had been relaxing in the living room, reading

the Sunday papers.

'Never!' Thoba's father had replied with offended conviction. 'Moulding these little ones requires much energy and self-sacrifice. I will not ever say "wait a minute" to duty. Don't you know me yet?'

'Oh, you teachers!' Thoba's mother had said with a sigh.

'Thoba!' called out the father.

'Baba!' responded Thoba who had been in his bedroom memorising Psalm 23. He had to be ready for the scripture oral examination the following morning.

'Show yourself,' said his father. Thoba appeared timidly at the door and leaned against it.

'What,' his father asked, 'is the square root of three hundred and twenty-five?' Thoba looked up at the ceiling. After some silence his father looked up from his newspaper and cast a knowing glance at his wife.

'You see,' he said. 'It takes time.'

Thoba's mother rose from her chair, dropped her paper and walked towards Thoba, her arms stretched out before her in order to embrace him. Thoba allowed himself to be embraced, all the while wishing his mother had not done that. It made him too helpless.

'Only yesterday,' his father drove the point home, 'we were working on square roots, and he has already forgotten. What kind of exams he is going to write this coming week is anybody's guess. Son, there has got to be a difference between the son of a teacher and other boys. But never mind. Einstein, if you care to know . . . Do you know him? Do you know Einstein?'

Thoba shook his head, brushing his forehead against his mother's breasts.

'Well, well,' his father said, 'you will know him in time. But that great mathematics genius was once your age; and then, he did not know his square roots.'

That was three weeks ago. And now, as Thoba looked at the other boys with him on the veranda, he felt glad that his father had gone to work, or else the man would certainly have turned the day into a tortuous tutorial. Instead, there was Thoba with Simangele and Vusi and Mpiyakhe, all by themselves, looking at the rain from the shelter of the famed veranda of Mayaba Street.

The veranda of Simangele's home was very popular with the boys of Mayaba Street. Simangele's parents had done all they could to chase the boys away. But then, it was the only veranda in the neighbourhood that was walled round. To most boys, its low front wall came up to their shoulders, so that anyone looking at them from the street would see many little heads just appearing above the wall. The boys loved to climb on that wall, run on it, chasing

one another. There had been many broken teeth, broken arms, and slashed tongues. Yet the boys, with the memory of chickens, would be back not long after each accident.

Once, Simangele's parents decided to lock the gate leading into the yard. But the boys of Mayaba Street, led by none other than Simangele himself, simply scaled the fence. Then it became a game to race over it: either from the street into the yard, or from the yard into the street. The fence gave in. By the time the decision was made to unlock the gate, it was too late. People either walked in through the gate, or walked over the flattened fence. Simangele's father then tried to surprise the boys by sneaking up on them with a whip. But it did not take long for them to enjoy being surprised and then chased down the street. He gave up.

Thoba, who was never allowed to play too long in the street, always felt honoured to be on that veranda. He was feeling exactly this way when, as he looked at the rain, he gave way to an inner glow of exultation.

'Oh!' he exclaimed, 'it's so nice during the holidays. We just play soccer all day.' He spoke to no one in particular. And nobody answered him. The others, with the exception of Mpiyakhe, really did not share Thoba's enthusiasm. They were always free always playing in the street. Just whenever they wanted. Thoba envied these boys. They seemed not to have demanding mothers who issued endless orders, inspected chores given and done, and sent their children on endless errands. Thoba smiled, savouring the thrill of being with them, and the joy of having followed the moment's inclination to join them on the veranda.

'How many goals did we score?' asked Mpiyakhe.

'Seven,' replied Vusi.

'Naw!' protested Simangele. 'It was six.'

'Seven!' insisted Vusi.

'Six!' shouted Simangele.

The two boys glared at each other for the second time. Thoba noticed that Nana had raised his head and was looking fixedly at the brewing conflict.

The rain poured gently now; it registered without much intrusion in the boys' minds as a distant background to the brief but charged silence.

'It doesn't matter, anyway,' said Vusi with some finality. 'We beat you.'

'Naw!' retorted Simangele. 'You haven't beaten us yet. The game was stopped by the rain. We are carrying on after the rain.' Who said we'll want to play after the rain? asked Vusi. What's how you are? said Simangele. I've long seen what kind you are. You

never want to lose.'

'Of course! Who likes to lose, anyway,' said Vusi triumphantly.

There followed a tense silence, longer



'It's everybody's discussion,' said Simangele. 'So you don't have to be talking to me. But if I talk about what you have said, I will talk to you directly. So, I'm saying it again; either there is thunder there, or there is no thunder out there. And right now there is no thunder out there.'

this time. All the boys looked at the rain, and as it faded back into their consciousness, the tension seemed to dissolve away into its sound. They crossed their arms over their chests, clutching at their shoulders firmly against the cold. They seemed lost in thought as they listened to the sound of the rain on the corrugated roofs of the township houses. It was loudest on the roof of the A.M.E. church which stood some fifty yards away, at the corner of Mayaba and Thobejane Streets. The sound on this roof was a sustained, heavy patter which reverberated with the emptiness of a building that was made entirely of corrugated iron. Even when the rain was a light shower, the roar it made on the church roof gave the impression of hail. Occasionally, there would be a great gust of wind, and the noise of the rain on the roofs would increase, and a gust of sound would flow away in ripples from house to house in the direction of the wind, leaving behind the quiet, regular patter.

'If there was a service in there,' said Thoba breaking the silence, and pointing towards the church with his head, 'would the people hear the sermon?'

'Reverend Mkhabela has a big voice,' said Mpiyakhe, demonstrating the size of the voice with his hands and his blown up cheeks.

'No voice can be bigger than thunder,' said Vusi matter-of-factly.

'Who talked about thunder?' asked Simangele, and then declared emphatically, 'There's no thunder out there. It's only rain out there.'

'Well,' said Vusi who probably had not meant his observation to be scrutinised, 'it seems like thunder.'

'Either there is thunder, or there is no thunder,' declared Simangele.

'Exactly what do you want from me?' asked Vusi desperately. 'I wasn't even talking to you.'

'It's everybody's discussion,' said Simangele. 'So you don't have to be talking to me. But if I talk about what you have said, I will talk to you directly. So, I'm saying it again: either there is thunder there, or there is no thunder out there. And right now there is no thunder out there.'

Vusi stepped away from the wall and faced Simangele, who also stepped away from the wall, faced Vusi, and waited. There was only Thoba between them. A fight seemed inevitable, and Thoba trembled, out of fear, and then also from the cold, which he could now feel even more, because it again reasserted both itself and the rain as the reasons he should have gone home in order to avoid a silly fight. He should have gone home. His mother was right. Now, he could be caught in the middle. He felt

responsible for the coming danger, because he had said something that had now gone out of control.

Mpiyakhe moved away from the wall and squatted next to Nana, who was also looking at the conflict. But a fight did not occur. Vusi stepped towards the wall, rested his hands on it, and looked out at the rain. Simangele made a click of annoyance and then turned towards the wall. Mpiyakhe sprang to his feet, and everybody looked at the rain once more. Thoba desperately tried to think of something pleasant to say; something harmless.

Then he saw two horses that were nibbling at the grass that loved to grow along the fence that surrounded the church. Horses loved to nibble at that grass, thought Thoba. And when they were not nibbling at the grass, they would be rubbing themselves against the fence. They loved that too. Horses were strange creatures. They just stood in the rain, eating grass as if there was no rain at all.

'Does a horse ever catch cold?' asked Thoba, again to no one in particular. It had been just an articulated thought. But Vusi took it up with some enthusiasm.

'Ho, boy! A horse,' exclaimed Vusi. 'A horse? It's got an iron skin. Hard. Tough.' He demonstrated with two black bony fists. 'They just don't get to coughing like people.'

'Now you want to tell us that a horse can cough,' said Simangele.

Nobody took that one up. The others looked at the two horses. Thoba considered Vusi's explanation, while at the same time frantically trying to find something to say before Simangele could find time to press on his antagonism. An iron skin? thought Thoba, and then spoke again.

'What sound does the rain make when it falls on the back of a horse?' But Vusi ignored the question and made another contentious statement.

'Me,' said Vusi, 'I don't just catch cold. Not me!' he declared.

'Now you are telling us a lie,' said Simangele. 'And you know that very well.'

'Now, don't ever say I tell lies,' shouted Vusi.

'There's no person in this world who never gets ill,' insisted Simangele.

'I never said "never," Vusi defended himself. 'I said, "don't just".'

**Vusi was one of those boys who were good at many things. He was very inventive. He made the best bird traps, the best slings, the best wire cars; and four-three, and six-one, and five-two, always came his way in a game of dice.**

Simangele did not pursue the matter. He had made his point. He was a year or two older than the other boys, and by far the tallest. The wall of the veranda came up to his chest. He had a lean but strong body. It was said he was like that because he was from the farms, and on the farms people are always running around and working hard all day, and they have no chance to get fat. So they become lean and strong. And when they get to the towns they become stubborn and arrogant because they don't understand things, and people laugh at them; and when people laugh at them they start fighting back. Then people say: 'Beware of those from the farms, they will stab with a broad smile on their faces.'

Simangele had lived in the township for two years now, but he was still known as the boy from the farms. And he could be deadly. Whenever there were street fights between the boys of Mayaba Street and those of Thipe Street, Simangele would be out there in front, leading the boys of Mayaba Street and throwing stones at the enemy with legendary accuracy. Sometimes Simangele would retreat during a fight, and then watch the boys of Mayaba Street being forced to retreat. Then he would run to the front again, and the enemy would retreat. And everybody would have seen the difference. Few boys ever took any chances with Simangele.

Vusi, on the other hand, was one of those boys who were good at many things. He was very inventive. He made the best bird traps, the best slings, the best wire cars; and four-three, and six-one, and five-two, always came his way in a game of dice. But it was in soccer that he was most famous. He was known to all the boys in the township, and everybody wanted to be on his side. He was nicknamed after Sandlane, Charterston Rovers' great dribbling wizard, who had a deformed right hand that was perpetually bent at the wrist, with the fingers stretched out firmly. And Vusi would always bend his wrist whenever the ball was in his possession. And his team mates would cheer 'Sandla-a-a-ne-e-e-!' And they would be looking at his deformed hand and its outstretched fingers, dry and dusty on the outside like the foot of a hen when it has raised its leg. And Vusi would go into a frenzy of dribbling, scoring goals with that sudden, unexpected shot.

Vusi was the only boy in Mayaba Street who could stand up to Simangele. The two had never actually fought, but they had been on the brink of fighting many times. The general speculation was that Simangele really did not want to take a chance; for who knew what would happen? Vusi was known to have

outbraved many boys, even those known to have been stronger than he. The problem with Vusi was that he fought to the death. All the boys knew he was a dangerous person to fight with, because you would be hitting and hitting him, but Vusi would keep coming and coming at you, and you would begin to lose hope. And then he might defeat you not because he was stronger, but because he kept coming at you, and you lost all hope. That is why it was thought Simangele never wanted to go all the way. In any case, there was really nothing awesome about Simangele's bravery. He had to be brave: he was older. But Vusi? He was a wonder.

It was for this reason that Thoba was busy considering Vusi's claim that he never got ill. It sounded familiar. Vusi was like Thoba's father. He was just that kind of person. Thoba's father was not the sick type; and Thoba's mother had always told visitors that her husband was a very strong man. And since Thoba felt instinctively on Vusi's side, he felt a pressing need to bear witness, if only to establish the truthfulness of Vusi's claim.

'My own father doesn't just get ill,' he declared. There was a brief silence after this, and then the others began to laugh. And Thoba felt how terrible it was to be young and have no power. Whatever you said was laughed at. It was a deeply indulgent laugh that helped to blow away all the tension that had existed just before. They just laughed. It was always the case when you are not very strong, and you have to say something.

'What is he telling us, this one?' said Mpiyakhe in the middle of a guffaw. 'Your family gets knocked down with all kinds of diseases. Everybody knows that. Softies, all of you. You're too higher-up. That's your problem. Instead of eating *papa* and beans, you have too many sandwiches.'

'Now, that is a lot of shit you are saying,' said Thoba trying to work up anger to counter the laughter.

'Don't ever say that about what I'm saying,' threatened Mpiyakhe.

'And what if I say it?' retorted Thoba.

'Take him on, boy, take him on,' said Simangele nudging Mpiyakhe in the stomach with an elbow.

Thoba began to feel uneasy. It was strange how the conflict had suddenly shifted down to him and Mpiyakhe who were at the lower end of the pecking order among the boys of Mayaba Street. He had fought Mpiyakhe a few times, and it was never clear who was stronger. Today he would win, tomorrow he would lose. That was how it was among the weak; a constant, unresolved struggle. Why should a simple truth about one's

father lead to ridicule and then to a fight? Thoba looked at Mpiyakhe and had the impulse to rush him. Should he? What would be the result of it? But the uncertainty of the outcome made Thoba look away towards the rain. He squeezed his shoulders, and felt deeply ashamed that he could not prove his worth before Vusi and Simangele. He had to find a way to deal with his rival.

Mpiyakhe's father was a prosperous man who ran a flourishing taxi service. His house, a famous landmark, was one of the biggest in the township. If a stranger was looking for some house in that neighbourhood, he was told: 'Go right down Mayaba Street until you see a big, green house. That will be Nzima's house. Once there, ask again . . .'

Screwed up to the front gate of the big, green house was a wooden board on which was painted 'Love Your Wife' in white paint. And whenever a man got into Mpiyakhe's father's taxi, he was always asked: 'Do you love your wife?' Thus, Mpiyakhe's father was known throughout the township as 'Love Your Wife'. As a result, Mpiyakhe was always teased about his father by the boys of Mayaba Street. And whenever that happened, he would let out steam on Thoba, trying to transfer the ridicule. After all, both their families were 'higher-ups' and if one family was a laughing stock the same should be applied to the other.

Thoba and Mpiyakhe were prevented from fighting by Nana, who suddenly began to cough violently. They all turned towards him. The cough was a long one, and it shook his frail body until he seemed to be having convulsions. Thoba wondered if Nana was going to die. And what would Nana's grandmother do to them if Nana died in their presence? If she healed people, surely she could also kill them. Nana continued to cough. And the boys could see his head go up and down. They looked at each other anxiously as if wondering what to do. But the cough finally ceased; and when Nana looked up, there were tears in his eyes and much mucus flowing down in two lines over his lips. He swept his lower arm over his lips and nose, then rubbed it against the side of his shirt.

'You should go home,' said Vusi to Nana.

'How can he go home in this rain?' said Simangele, taking advantage of Nana's refusal. Vusi turned away indignantly. Thoba wondered if he should take off his shirt and give it to Nana. But he quickly decided against it. He himself could die. He turned away to look at the rain. He saw that Vusi was looking at the horses eating grass in the rain. He saw the concentration on Vusi's face. He watched as a sudden gleam

came to Vusi's eye, and Vusi slowly turned his face away from the rain to fix an omniously excited gaze on Simangele. He looked at the rain again, and then his look took on a determined intensity. He turned to Simangele again.

'Simangele,' called Vusi. 'How would you like to be a horse in the rain?'

'A horse in the rain?' said Simangele tentatively. He looked at Thoba and Mpiyakhe, and seemed embarrassed, as if there was something he could not understand.

'Yes, a horse in the rain,' said Vusi. There was a look of triumph in his face. 'Look at the horses. They are in the rain. Yet they have nothing on them. I bet you can never go into the rain without your shirt.'

Simangele laughed. 'That is foolishness,' he said.

'No,' said Vusi. 'It is not foolishness.' And as he spoke, Vusi was slowly pulling out his shirt without loosening the belt that held it tightly round the waist where it was tucked into the trousers. All the while he was looking steadily at Simangele.

Simangele stopped laughing and began to look uneasy. Once more he looked at Vusi and Mpiyakhe. And then he looked at Nana on the floor. Their eyes met, and Simangele looked away quickly. Meanwhile, his jaws tightened, Vusi was unbuttoning his shirt from the ruffled bottom upwards. Then he took off his shirt slowly, exposing a thin, shining, black body taut with strength. Thoba felt a tremor of iciness through his body as if it was his body that had been exposed. Vusi had thrust his chest out and arched his arms back so that his shirt dangled from his right hand. Soon his body was looking like a plucked chicken.

'I'm a horse now,' said Vusi. 'Let's see if you too can be a horse.' He did not wait for an answer. Dropping his shirt with a flourish, Vusi flung himself into the rain. He braced his head against the rain and ran up Thobejane Street, which was directly opposite Simangele's home and formed a T-junction with Mayaba Street. Thobejane Street went right up and disappeared in the distance. Vusi ran so fast, he seemed to have grown shorter. Soon he was a tiny black speck in the rain; and the far distance of

**As he looked into Simangele's eyes, he felt a strange sense of power over Simangele. Simangele did not want to go into the rain, but he would go, because Thoba was looking at him. Nana was looking at him with those large eyes. And they had all been there when Simangele was challenged. He would have to go.**

the street seemed to swallow him up. Not once did he look back.

It had all happened so suddenly, Thoba thought. Just like the day a formation of military jets had suddenly come from nowhere to fly low round the township a number of times, deafening the place with noise. And then they were gone, leaving behind a petrifying, stunned silence which totally blocked thinking until many minutes later.

Simangele looked like someone who thought he had enough time, but when he got to the station found that the train was already pulling out, and that he had to suffer the indignity of running after it. He looked at Thoba and Mpiyakhe. They looked back. Then a wave of anger and frustration crossed his face.

'What are you doing here on my veranda?' he yelled at the two boys. They moved towards a corner away from him. There was silence. Then Simangele looked at Nana.

'I didn't mean you,' he said with a faint plea in his voice. Then he looked at the small figure in the rain. It was so far now that it did not even seem to be moving. He looked at the sky. It was grey, and the rain was grey. He looked at the two boys again, Thoba cringed, and looked well into Simangele's eyes. And then suddenly Thoba did not feel afraid anymore. As he looked into Simangele's eyes, he felt a strange sense of power over Simangele. Simangele did not want to go into the rain, but he would go, because Thoba was looking at him. Mpiyakhe was looking at him. Nana was looking at him with those large eyes. And they had all been there when Simangele was challenged. He would have to go.

Slowly, and seemingly with much pain, Simangele fingered the buttons of his shirt. He unbuttoned only the three upper buttons and pulled the shirt over his head. Just then, a gust of wind swept the rain, making it sound harder on the roofs of houses. Simangele shuddered. He threw his shirt on the floor and then stretched his leg out into the rain and watched his gray, dry skin turn brown and wet. Then he eased himself into the rain. He shivered, and that made him seem to decide he had better run. He was out there now, running in the street, following Vusi. But his strides were much less confident than Vusi's magnanimous strides. Simangele jumped over puddles where his challenger had just waded in and out of them like a galloping horse. Thoba and Mpiyakhe watched him in silence until he vanished into the distance.

Thoba and Mpiyakhe moved out of the corner at the same time, and went to stand before the low wall. They

stood there looking out at the streets in silence. Thoba became aware that he was stealing glances at Mpiyakhe. Of course he was not afraid of him. Yes, indeed, Mpiyakhe was stealing glances at him too. But now that there were only the two of them, there really seemed no reason to quarrel. There was nobody else to entertain at the expense of each other. Nana? Thoba looked at him. Their eyes met. He looked away. Wouldn't questions be asked later? What did Thoba and Mpiyakhe do after Vusi and Simangele had run into the rain to settle scores? Weren't Thoba and Mpiyakhe known rivals? And then there was Nana to tell the story. There was the rain. There were the empty streets. It was cold out there. But there could be glory out there for a shirtless boy.

Thoba wondered if he should issue a challenge. That was certainly attractive. But less attractive was the ordeal of running in the rain. But there was no thunder. Only water. That's all. No lightning to fear. Only water falling from the sky. What was water? Only water. And the cold? Once he was out there he would forget about it, because he would be involved in the running. That's the trick. The horses went on eating wet grass. They were involved. How was the sound of the rain on the back of a horse? What sound would the rain make on a boy's body?

Thoba and Mpiyakhe looked at each other again, only to look away once more. Clearly there was something they could not confront. When Thoba stole a glance at Mpiyakhe through the corner of his eye, he noticed that Mpiyakhe was looking at him. When Mpiyakhe finally spoke, it was slowly and tentatively.

'Do you . . . ' he asked, 'do you want to go into the rain?'

Thoba pretended he had not heard, and continued to look at the rain. But then he broke into a smile, and turned his face to look at Mpiyakhe. Mpiyakhe had not issued a challenge. He had not. He had merely asked a question. Here was an uneasy boy who was trying to persuade him into an intimate truce. Here was a boy who assumed there were mutual fears; who did not know for sure. Here was a boy asking his way into a compromise. This boy did not deserve an answer.

Slowly and deliberately, and with a gleam in his eye, Thoba unbuttoned his shirt, and as he pulled it over his head, he felt the warmth of his breath on his chest. And that gave him a momentary impression of dreaming, for he had a clear image of Vusi taking off his shirt. But the image did not last; it was shattered by the re-emergence of his head into the cold. He shivered as goose pimples literally sprang out on his skin

before his eyes. But he would have to be reckless. That was bravery. Bravery meant forgetting about one's mother.

Thoba threw his shirt on to the floor where it joined Vusi's and Simangele's. And the last thing he did before he burst into the rain was look at Nana, as if pleading for approval. Their eyes met. Those were the eyes he would carry in his mind into the rain, as if the whole township was looking at him. Mpiyakhe? He did not even deserve a glance.

When the cold water of the rain hit him, Thoba had the impulse to run back onto the veranda. But when he got into the street, he felt nothing but exhilaration. There was something freeing in the tickling pressure of the soft needles of rain on his skin. And then he ran in spurts: running fast and slowing down, playing with the pressure of the rain on him. It was a pleasant sensation; a soft, pattering sensation. And the rain purred so delicately against his ears. And when he waded in and out of puddles, savouring the recklessness, it was so enchanting to split the water, creating his own little thunder from the numerous splashes. He was alone in the street with the rain. He was shirtless in the rain. How many people were watching him from the protective safety of their houses? How many? They were sitting round their kitchen stoves, taking no challenges. Mpiyakhe? Was he watching him? Of course. Mpiyakhe, the vanquished. Everybody would know. Vusi and Simangele would know that he, Thoba, had bravely followed them into the cold rain.

He passed the A.M.E. church and crossed Thipe Street. Where were the boys of that street? They would not come out to fight on such a day. Weaklings, the lot of them. Up he went, crossing Ndimande Street. Where were the boys of that street? Weaklings too. They were not in the rain.

He ran up towards the crèche now. He had been there as a child, when he was younger. Would he be recognised from the windows as the man who had been there as a child? Would the matron see him? Would she say, 'There is my little man?' Should he slow down and be seen? No. The boy broke into a sprint. Wouldn't it be better for them to say, 'Doesn't that look like Thoba?' They wouldn't be sure. That way they would think about him a little longer, trying to be sure. He wished he were a

Thoba had vowed that he would cry until his father came back home to deal with his mother. His father did not come. So, long after the tears and the anger had gone, Thoba had continued to cry with his voice only.

blur. The wind and the water! He could not feel them anymore, for they had dissipated into the sustained alacrity of speed.

Beyond the crèche was the Dutch Reformed Church, and beyond that, far out of the township, were the rugged, rocky hills where men and women always went in pairs, on Sunday afternoons. Thoba slowed down somewhat. If he ran further up the street, he would get nearer those hills, and one could never be sure about those hills. It was said there was a beast there which swallowed up little children, especially in bad weather. He wondered if Vusi and Simangele had gone further up. No, he would not go towards the hills. Thoba passed the church, but instead of going up, he turned left into Twala Street. Even though he could outrun the beast, it would be foolish to go nearer it first.

As he turned into Twala Street, he tried to increase his speed once more, but noted with faint anxiety that he was unable to. He was slowing down now, and that was not good. He was very far from home now. Did he reach the limits of his endurance so soon? And yet the surge of exhilaration was definitely beginning to fade away. But he would have to keep up the pace at least until the crèche was well out of sight. Why did people tire? Did Vusi tire, or did he run all the way? There was no sign of him. Maybe it was the Dutch Reformed Church; he shouldn't have looked at it. He should have closed his eyes when he passed it, for that was the church of ill luck. Everybody said so. But he would have to run, all the same. At least until the crèche was well out of sight. And as soon as he made that commitment, Thoba suddenly felt as he had the day his mother had beaten him with a wet dish cloth for cracking open an egg that had a half-formed chick in it.

Thoba had vowed that he would cry until his father came back home to deal with his mother. His father did not come. So, long after the tears and the anger had gone, Thoba had continued to cry with his voice only. It had been painful in his throat and somewhere in his chest. And now, as he continued to run, Thoba realised that the fire was going out of him. There was left only the pain of tiring legs. Yet, he was too far from home to tire. He looked back briefly. The crèche was out of sight; and just then, the tiredness assailed him. He could feel the ache in his calves. He slowed down to an easy trot. If only he could reach Nala Street; that would take him back home.

Then he became conscious of the sound of water rushing down in two streams on the sides of the street, towards the Dutch Reformed Church.

His eyes followed the direction of the water until he saw the church in the distance back there. He turned away quickly. What would happen if the water went into the church and flooded it? Would it float like Noah's ark?

When he turned left at Mosotwana Street, he saw Nala Street some five houses away. And only then did he realise why he had heard the sound of the rushing streams so clearly. It had stopped raining. There was a heavy stillness around him, for the roofs of houses had gone silent. And the sound of rushing water made the streams sound bigger than they actually were. He began to feel exposed. He broke his trot and walked, arms akimbo. He was tired, and the rain was embarrassingly tired, for it was now falling in tiny droplets as weak as the sprays at the edge of a waterfall. There was no one else in the street, not even a stray dog. And then he began to feel cold.

He was about three houses from Nala Street when a familiar taxi turned into Mosotwana Street, forcing him to run towards the nearest fence away from danger. He wondered if Mpiyakhe's father had seen him. Thoba stopped, rested his arms on the fence, so that those in the taxi could see only his back. He enjoyed the wonderful sensation of stillness. But that was not to last very long. The taxi stopped only about ten yards away from Thoba. A man got off and ran into the next house as if he thought it was still raining. Thoba heard Mpiyakhe's father shout after the man: 'Love your wife!' In a few seconds, the taxi started up, but it did not go forward; instead it reversed and stopped about two yards from Thoba. Thoba froze. So the man had recognised him.

'Hey, boy!' shouted Mpiyakhe's father. 'Are you not teacher Mbele's son?'

Thoba turned his head and nodded. The passengers in the taxi were all looking at him. Why did Mpiyakhe's father not leave him alone?

'Yes, I thought so,' said Mpiyakhe's father. 'Do your parents know you are here?'

Thoba looked away and did not answer.

'Boy, I'm talking to you.'

Thoba looked at the man again. His head was sticking out of the driver's open window. What would happen if another car came and the head was still sticking out? Surely that head would be sliced off.

'Boy, I'm talking to you.'

First it was Mpiyakhe; now it was his father.

'Now get into this car, and let me take you home.'

It could not be. To be taken home

like a drenched chicken! To be taken home in his enemy's car! It could not be. His own feet would carry him home.

'Come on. Get into the car.'

Thoba began to walk away.

'Boy, I will not let your parents accuse me of killing you!'

Thoba continued to trudge away.

'Boy, get into this car!'

Nothing would stop him.

'You all saw him defy me, didn't you!'

When Thoba heard the engine of the car revving up, he tried to run. But he needn't have: the car went on its way in the opposite direction. Thoba ran for only a few yards before he reached Nala Street.

When he looked down Nala Street in the far distance, Thoba saw something which discouraged him further. Two buses were lugging up slowly towards the township. They were the first afternoon buses bringing workers who knocked off early. If only he could

---

**How could Thoba explain? Should he walk away or continue to listen? The questions were piling up; being as many as there were women returning from work.**

---

reach the bus stop and pass it before the buses got there. If not it would be embarrassing. All those people! What would they say? What was a shirtless boy doing in the cold rain? But the pain in the calves. The pain in the thighs. He just wanted to stand still. Then he began to shiver violently. It always got colder after the rain. He must move on. But try as he might, he could not run. He knew then that he would never beat the buses to the bus stop. And by the time they got there, and the passengers were streaming out of them like ants, Thoba was still very far from the bus stop, and would surely meet the workers coming up.

And he saw them: the bulk of them. Women. They were coming up; a disordered column of women with shopping bags balanced on their heads. He would meet them somewhere in the middle of the street. If only he could run so fast that when he passed them, they would be a blur to him; and he would be a blur to them. He knew he wouldn't make it. He felt so exposed: shirtless; shoeless; a wet body in a dripping pair of pants that clung tightly and coldly to him. They would surely see the outline of his buttocks. And his penis? Would they see it too? That would be worse.

Indeed, there was mother Mofokeng, one of Thoba's mother's many friends. Everybody knew his mother. Mother Mofokeng would certainly recognise him. Then he stepped onto a pointed

stone. At first the pain was dull, but once it cut through his almost iced foot, it tore up to his chest. He jerked to a stop, grimacing with pain, as he raised the hurt foot ever so slightly as if he wanted to keep it on the ground at all costs. He felt like a sleeping horse when it lifts one hoof a fraction from the ground. He was far from home. And he felt tears forming in his eyes. But he fought them back by blinking repeatedly.

'Wonder of wonders!' exclaimed mother Mofokeng. 'What am I seeing? God in heaven what am I seeing? Curse me if this isn't the nurse's child!'

'Which nurse?' asked another mother.

'Staff nurse Mbele's son,' said mother Mofokeng.

'Is this the nurse's child? He looks so much like her!'

'Son,' inquired mother Mofokeng, 'what are you doing here in the cold?'

Thoba looked at her, and then looked at the battered leather shopping bag balanced on her head. It was bulging with vegetables. Some spinach and carrots were peeping from a hole on the side.

'Here's a child who will die of cold,' said a mother who had just joined the crowd.

'And you'd think his mother would know better,' said another.

'Where's your shirt, son?' asked mother Mofokeng.

'This is what I've always maintained about school holidays,' said another. 'You are busy working your heart out at the white man's, and your children are busy running wild. I don't know why they have these holidays.'

'And in this weather of all weathers in the world,' said another.

'Woman!' exclaimed another. 'I'm telling you, what else can you do with children?'

How could Thoba explain? Should he walk away or continue to listen? The questions were piling up; being as many as there were women returning from work. He would wait. Surely it would be disrespectful to walk away from elders. Yet the questions came; and the piercing cold; and the stinging pain of muscles. His teeth began to chatter.

'Whose child is this?'

'Shame! What happened to him?'

'Where's his shirt? Did anybody take your shirt, son?'

---

**Then he felt two thin lines of heat flowing down his cheeks. His tears had betrayed him. And the eyes grew painful. Instead of the speed he had desired, it was now his tears that had turned the women into a blur. He could not see them now. That was the time to leave.**

---



'Who has done this sin?'

'Leave the child alone! Run home son!'

'It's so easy to die!'

'Exposure!'

'Sponge wet. Look how the trousers cling to him.'

'Women of the township! Why don't you leave this child alone?'

Thoba had crossed his arms across his chest as if that way he could create some heat. Better the rain than the cold which follows it. He was far from home, and the women had created a cordon of humiliation around him. Then he felt two thin lines of heat flowing down his cheeks. His tears had betrayed him. And the eyes grew painful. Instead of the speed he had desired, it was now his tears that had turned the woman into a blur. He could not see them now. That was the time to leave.

'Here's my jersey, son,' said mother Mofokeng. 'Bring it back tomorrow.'

Thoba felt the warm wool settle on his shoulders. But he had begun to move. And he saw the forms before him

part; and then came a grey emptiness. He limped away, wounded with sympathy. A few feet away from the women, he impulsively began to run. He did not see where he was going; as he picked up speed, the jersey slipped from his shoulders. And he heard the countless voices of women shouting: 'It has slipped! It has fallen! Pick it up! The jersey has fallen! Pick it up, son! Stop him! Stop him!' Thoba broke into a sprint. It was the most satisfying sprint, for it was so difficult, so painful. It had led him out of humiliation.

When he finally cleared his eyes with the back of his hand, Thoba realised that he was at the junction where Nala, Mshoeshoe, and Ndimande Streets met. Just across the street was the police station. More buses were coming up. More women were coming. Thoba definitely felt no pain now. He flew past the police station, the bus stop, Thipe Street . . . Mayaba Street was the next. Where were the boys of Mayaba Street? Would they be waiting for his return? As he took the corner into Mayaba Street, Thoba increased his speed; and, spreading his arms out like the wings of an aeroplane, he banked into Mayaba Street.

The street was as empty as he had left it at the other end. No Vusi, no Simangele, no Mpiyakhe, no Nana.

No boys had come out yet to race little twigs on the streamlets in the street. Was anybody looking through the window? Was Mpiyakhe, the vanquished, still on the veranda? Or had his father rescued him? Thoba wondered if he should run on to the veranda to collect his shirt. No. Let it lie there on the floor of the veranda of Simangele's home. It would be tomorrow's testimony.

There was no one at home yet when Thoba arrived. He would have to make the fire before his mother came. But the stillness inside his home suddenly made him feel lonely, and all the pain came back again. No, he would not make the fire. Let his mother do whatever she liked with him. He would not make the fire. He passed on from the kitchen into his bedroom. There, he took off his trousers, and left them in a wet little heap on the floor close to his bed. He felt dry, but cold, as he slipped into the blankets. He felt warm, deep inside him. And as he turned over in bed, looking for the most comfortable position, he felt all the pain. But, strangely enough, he wished he could turn around as many times as possible. There was suddenly something deeply satisfying and pleasurable about the pain. And as he slid into a deep sleep, he smiled, feeling so much alive. ●

## POETRY

D.P. Parenzee

### OFFICE HOURS

morning.

Each day another card  
in a bland filing system:

sit  
shiver  
gulp hot coffee, then off  
with gloves, scarf  
jacket and caustic chat  
to agitate the blood.

we show each other our hands,  
laugh or analyse  
last night's T.V. or study  
the table's grain in silence.  
Focus the brain. remember

the in-tray, queries,  
yesterday's failed remains  
spread to the desk's four corners.  
Make notes on the system,  
adjust

the air conditioner, the light  
satisfactory, we go on  
into the morning.

### NOW TO BEGIN

One starts off from a position of defeat, teaching  
books, chairs, essays, furniture. The windows  
have to be opened each morning. Air  
is a valuable commodity. Education  
thickens in the classroomed silence.

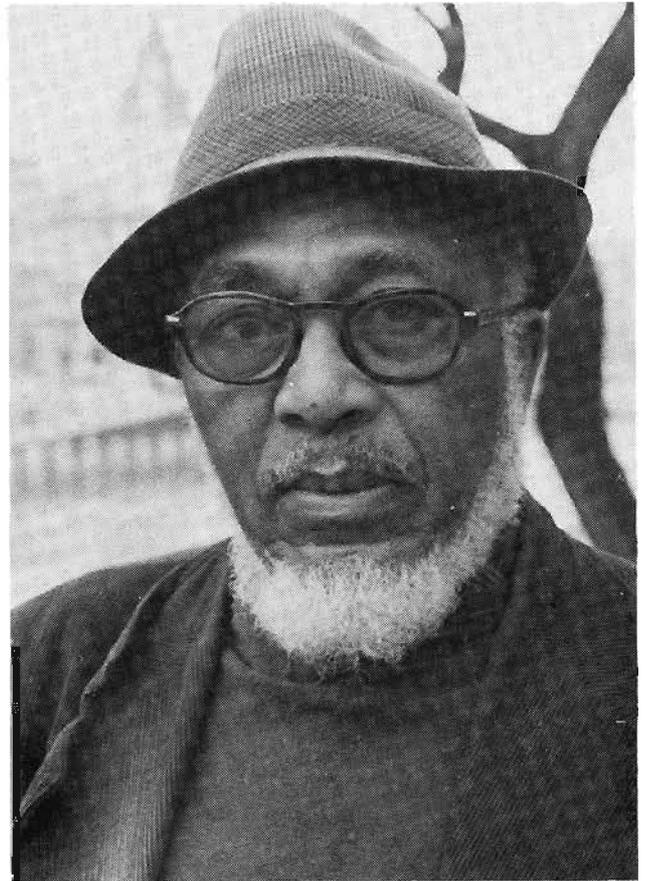
Preconceptions evaporate:  
each set of eyes multiplied by days;  
a mountain of knowledge,  
the teacher dragging feet  
from one point to another.  
Shift of stance; chalk breaks; heads  
jerk.

Interminable evenings of preparation  
will always be necessary, just  
as the rewards always knock in the early hours;  
a natural cycle, seeming impossible  
to subvert.

Until the morning  
a diminutive bullet flashes through the window  
breaking the rhythm, wings spreading  
chaos.

dull faces in backrows are transformed;  
the animated shrieks of red speak  
in volumes, now  
to begin.

# RETICENT, HE EXPRESSED HIS PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE THROUGH HIS PAINTINGS



*Gerard Sekoto pic by Cedric Nunn*

Gerard Sekoto is regarded by many as one of the pioneers of modern African Art. In response to a profile on Sekoto published in *Staffrider* (Volume 5 No 2) Mr Nimrod Ndebele, who knew Sekoto personally, has written this letter, so factual and culturally rich, that we felt we had to share it with all our readers.

Dear Mr M Figlan

I am writing in connection with your profile on Gerard John Sekoto in the current issue of *Staffrider*, Volume 5 Number 2 of 1982.

I have three originals of Sekoto's paintings which I bought from him just before he left for Paris. One is a scene in Gerty Street in Sophiatown. It shows an African garbage collector off-loading refuse into a Municipal donkey cart for collecting such from stand to stand in the townships. Significant about this painting is that the donkey looks better cared for than all the humans around it. There is nothing in the painting to indicate that the scene is Gerty Street between Edward and Milner Roads somewhere kwa-Nhlapo a coal merchant. But Gerard told me about this scene and how it inspired him to paint it.

The second painting is a typical South African scene showing African workers busy with the erection of a large building. A white man is looking on, standing with his hands in his trousers pockets watching his African 'daka boys' pushing wheelbarrows and throwing bricks, one at a time, towards those who catch them and place them where they are needed. The background is higher than normal near some rocky rise of ground.

The third could be given a title similar to the one in your article 'Starvation in the midst of Plenty'. It shows an Indian fruit vendor with his large basket full of a variety of fruit

displayed for sale. The vendor rests his head in the palm of one of his hands and looks on in front of him as if day-dreaming . . . He looks blank and almost absent minded. He is occupying part of the street pavements of the centre of Johannesburg with its many skyscrapers as background. Well attired whites in motion fill the pavements and posh cars are in the streets, driven by their owners to their destinations. The vendor seems oblivious of all this. He is just waiting for someone to awaken him from his far off world and bring him back to where he is. I recall on some occasion someone who was looking at this painting remarking: 'Damn this fellow! Why should he look so miserable and hungry? Let him just take and gobble up one of the fruit he is selling and assuage his hunger and thereby look more cheerful!'

A fourth in my collection of Sekoto's paintings is a reprint I cut out of some publication. It is entitled 'The Prisoners'. I had it framed.

Now let me reveal to you how closely connected Mr L P Makenna and I were with both Sekoto and Mancoba. We are retired Inspectors of Schools of what is now called Lebowa. We were colleagues of the two artists at Khaiso, which was the first school after St Peter's in Rosertenville, Johannesburg, to have secondary school education in the Transvaal. Mr Mancoba was in the secondary school section and Mr Sekoto in the primary school. The school is in Pietersburg and still functions. The correct name of the sculptor/artist is MANCOBA, definitely not and never Manqoba. You can

verify this with authorities of Khaiso High School. You may phone the existing principal of the school for such information. Mancoba was guardian to some younger brother of his who was then a pupil at Khaiso School. He came from Etwatwa in Benoni. Mr Mancoba was an employee of the then Native Education Department of the Transvaal. A check in this respect can be made there also. Mr Makenna now resides in Fersterus in Pretoria.

Now about Sekoto's departure for Paris: Did he not leave eight, nine or even ten years earlier than the 1947 you mention in your article? That is, two, three or even four years after the departure of Mancoba? I left Khaiso to teach at the then Johannesburg Bantu High School under Mr H P Madibane. While I was there from 1942 to 1947, when at the end of this period I completed my part-time studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, I do not ever remember meeting Sekoto then. My residence was first in Sophiatown and later Western Native Township. Gerard and I would have met regularly if he were resident somewhere around there at the time. Those were the days when we had among our pupils Bishop Desmond Tutu and the writer Miriam Tlali, to mention only two, who are outstanding leaders in this land today. I have in my possession what we should now call 'MADIBANEANA' which I am ready to hand over to a relevant national museum for Blacks for the benefit of posterity. I was the staff secretary then.

After that little deviation let me return to what directly concerns your research. Mr Makenna and I owe Mr Mancoba a debt of gratitude in that he improved our way of thinking about life in general. He held definite and strong views on social and political matters. He was an unflinching Marxist and he made no apologies about that. In those days, the mid-thirties, when life appeared less worldly than now, he gave us the shock of our lives when he bluntly told us that he did not believe in the existence of God. Yes. This was too much for us! We could not believe our ears, that we heard him correctly. He often spoke with contempt of the so-called Christian way of living. His interest was in the life of the simple folk as depicted in the writings of authors like Charles Dickens. It took a very long time indeed to reconcile ourselves with his atheistic ideas. He himself led a simple life and avoided any form of artificial living as do people in high classes of society, the rich. He dressed simply. I take it that his art will indicate his philosophy of life. We, his acquaintances who have very slowly developed philosophically to the point of regarding ourselves as Existentialists or African Humanists, followers of Professor Dr Es'kia Mphahlele who is busy spreading 'these good tidings of great joy' of the twentieth century. 'Oldies' as we are we make no noise about this and we do not attempt to convert others to our way of thinking. I do not know whether Mr Makenna will take me to task for going as far as I have done. It is not by agreement that I have done so. There are certain practices we take part in as a social obligation — practices which do not quite tally with our life philosophy. Through reading and watching television we interpret what we experience our own way, that is empirically, as guided by Mancoba. I think that at this juncture it would be appropriate if I quote from 'Affirmative Rationalism' by Arthur B Henn, an American, from which we realise that 'Gods of all ages have been mere personifications of the highest good mankind has known within itself from age to age.' Our discovery of all this had its beginnings which were prompted by Ernest Mancoba.

Gerard Sekoto did not talk much. He expressed his philosophy of life through his paintings as I described above. He still does so to this day. He led a normal social life. He caused no social problems for himself, he indulged in no way excessively in the so-called man's vices. When he left the country no question of getting married had ever entered his mind. I guess that he remains a bachelor to this day. He had a

good sense of humour, if not wit, and he could laugh heartily at anything that amused him. Finally let me reveal that we discovered our two artists to be good actors in drama. In a one-act play 'The Old Bull' (I do not recall the author, as I am writing this from memory) which I produced with the teachers of Khaiso School — our colleagues — Ernest and Gerard acted their parts, Charles and Tom Bones respectively, very well indeed. Mr Makenna was Uncle Williams. It is a pity we took no photographs in the costumes of this play. The ones we have are of no special significance.

This is as much as I can reveal to you about the two artists as we know them. Make your choice of what is relevant for your research. You may arrange a recorded interview if you think it could be of good use to you and you think you can get more from us. Finally, Mr Figlan, I have another original drawing in crayon by Motyuoadi of Mamelodi in Pretoria, which he drew on New Year's Day, which he spent in my house with friends at 1310 Ndebele Street in Charterston Township in Nigel. I do not recall the year. I wonder whether this work is also relevant for your research.

Now on a more personal note: There was a Mr Figlan teaching in one of the schools in Western Native Township, possibly the American Board Primary School with Mr C Molamu as its Headmaster. This was when I was a teacher at Mr Madibane's school as I have already mentioned above. Are you that Mr Figlan's son, or is he just a 'fana sibengo' relative? My son who is possibly as old as you are, Njabulo S. Ndebele, contributes short stories fairly regularly to *Staff-rider*. We will, it appears, discover somewhere in our communication, that there is some very small connection between us.

Cheerio!

Yours sincerely

N N Ndebele

## TLS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT  
Priory House, St John's Lane, London EC1M 4BX

Special Number

SOUTHERN AFRICA

TLS — is doing a special feature on Southern Africa. There will be reviews of books on politics and history of the various countries plus looking at the new literature, theatre and music which originates there.

— Obtainable from local stockists —

# LIFE-SUSTAINING POETRY OF A FIGHTING PEOPLE

In a letter to Ravan Press, writer Njabulo Ndebele articulates his strong reservations about being included in an anthology entitled 'Ask Any Black Man' since it carries the same connotations as did books by black writers a decade ago . . . . 'In which the onus was on us to prove our humanity . . . to show that there was something behind the statistic. The liberal publisher was really bringing us out to dance. "Ask Any Black Man" is a residue of that past and not a spirit of the future . . . .'

Here is the full text of Ndebele's letter which prompted Ravan to re-title the book *The Return of the Amasi Bird*.

*Fools and Other Stories* by Njabulo Ndebele will be published by Ravan Press this year.

Dear Chris and Mike

Thank you very much for sending me the poem by Nkathazo Mnyayiza. It has given me a sense of the reasoning that led to the title 'Ask Any Black Man'. Unfortunately, the poem does not convince me, nor does the probable reasoning, consequently, behind the title. I will not try to speculate on this reasoning for I really have no knowledge of it since the poem was not accompanied by any explanation. In any case the poem does reinforce my conviction about the unsuitability of the suggested title. Let me make the following points in this regard.

1. The suggested title really presents no conceptual advance on *To Whom It May Concern*, a title published by Donker in 1973. So we are talking of an interval of almost ten years! Surely much has happened in South Africa during that interval. At that time, when *To Whom It May Concern* was published we were all being revealed to White South Africa. *To Whom It May Concern* was the archetypal white man in an office, in a shop, at any possible place of employment, at home in the 'kitchens' etc. We were being revealed to him. The onus was on us to prove our humanity. That is what Sepamla's poem was doing: to show that there was something behind the statistic. The liberal publisher was really bringing us out to dance. Mnyayiza's poem is a residue of that past and not the spirit of the present.

Who should ask any black man? Surely not another African. We know and have known for centuries the agony of oppression. In any case, that pain, that agony has been explained enough. Logic points out therefore, that it's the white man who has to ask any black man. So we have yet another book appealing to the conscience of those who have been proven not to have any.

2. The suggested title demonstrates some kind of phoney militancy of the same kind as 'Listen White Man'. Its impotence is crushing. It also carries a sort of pathetic hipness, similar to that by which our homes are called *kbayas* and 'haven't we found the proper way of calling their homes?' This sort of thing presupposes the white person's knowledge of and sympathy with the conditions of Africans, and the former's willingness to listen. All of which the Africans are supposed to appreciate, and be grateful for. The point of the matter is that the suggested title still very much makes

Africans alien objects of interest.

3. The effect of all this is to help further standardise reader response. A most destructive and reactionary tendency in an oppressive capitalist society. The tendency is to make the average white reader, to whom the suggested title seems obviously directed, approach the book in a kind of *mea culpa* fashion, to seek confirmation of what he expects to find, rather than to be made and to be prepared to confront significant experience artistically rendered. A proper title will challenge the reader, making him curious and ready to be challenged by something which may have a most profound bearing on his own humanity. The fact of the matter is that there is no European in South Africa who does not know what he has done, directly or indirectly, to the African. What is the use then for us to be turned into writers of confirmation? The need is to alter perceptions. The suggested title merely panders to white hypocrisy.

4. Siphso Sepamla's eponymous 'To Whom It May Concern' is an excellent poem: tense, well controlled, dramatic, and forever fresh. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Mnyayiza's poem. It is just an interesting poem. It makes no new statement about our experience. A poem with such weak resonance cannot carry the vigorous heaviness of a creative, and constantly changing tradition. The book, whatever poems have been chosen for it, is certainly going to be too heavy for such a poem to provide words for its recognition.

5. I notice too, that the editors want to cover a tradition that begins in 1891 up to 1981. Just under a century of poetry. Surely, the voice of Africa over the decades: the voice of strife, of survival against the greatest odds of humiliation, of hope and achievement . . . surely that voice cannot be reduced to a fawning title such as 'Ask Any Black Man'.

6. Perhaps the biggest indictment against the suggested title is its lack of imagination. A few examples will show what I mean. Mrshali called his book *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. Not bad. But it was making an anthropological posture that I did not, and still do not believe in. The same goes for Serote's *YaKhal'inkomo*, but in an urban setting. But it was a step in the right direction. Then Serote came with *No Baby Must Weep*. After that, we cannot have anymore, titles which imply that people are still weeping. Indeed, the poetry I have

seen in *Staffrider* is not a poetry of weeping people, waiting to be asked what the problem is, waiting to be told that they do not have to look up 'suffering' in the dictionary. It is the poetry of a fighting people!

I have just finished reading a book the title of which represents the quality of imagination I'm thinking about. It is called *There is a River*, subtitled 'The Black Struggle for Freedom in America. Through the metaphor of a river, long immortalised by Langston Hughes in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Vincent Harding, in a monumental fusion of scholarship and the linguistic evocation reminiscent of the *riots*, writes about the river of struggle; the river of survival; the river of the inevitability of change and revolution; the river of tradition; the river of time, of permanence, of the endless gaze of the Sphinx into eternity. It is a similar river Serote had recognised earlier when he wrote:

the river flows  
curls into my sleep where i wake into my dreams  
the dreams where ecstasy grows like a cloud and  
curls into reality.

It seems to me that the editors, both of whom I respect, have to look at their collection again, for something positive, something life-sustaining which is a thread that runs through the decades, and come up with a title that will echo and

express the essence of growth and fruition up to this point in our history. Alternatively, they might opt for a purely neutral title: African poetry from . . . to . . . . But then, I will not presume to undermine the prerogative of the editors to come up with their title. Only, if I do not identify with it, if it distorts my perception of where my people are at this point in time, I will refuse to have anything to do with it.

I hope that I have shown something of the strength of my conviction in this very serious matter: Nothing in South Africa is neutral. None of my poems have been written for people who wanted to hear me complain. They have been written in order to share serious insights, to share perceptions, and to *alter* perceptions in a most profound manner. I have gone *far beyond* begging to be 'heard'. I am not even demanding. It is the pure force of my people's inevitable presence that I want to consolidate. And I want to help to consolidate it to a point where we shall overcome, much more profoundly, with the very fact of our positive existence. This is what Serote must have meant when he said:

ah  
africa  
is this not your child come home?

My vigilance will permit me no regression to any humiliating aspect of the past. No: no more. ●

## POETRY

Karen Press

### unofficial enquiry

what did the woman carrying a bundle of wood on her head  
say to the research group  
that met her on the road?

what did the research group dusty and hot  
say to the project head  
when they made their report-back?

what did the project head shuffling his many notes  
say to the financial administrator  
when he offered his recommendations?

what did the financial administrator calculating quickly  
say to the board of trustees  
in his advisory capacity?

what exactly did the child die of  
as its mother burnt the scraps of wood  
one by one?

### a difficult question

oh mama dear, when the revolution comes  
what shall I say to those big black men with guns?  
shall I beg them not to shoot us?  
shall I plead with them to save us?  
and when they ask me why, what shall I say?

that you taught me how to love my little brother,  
that you taught me how to give to charity,  
that you taught me always to think of another  
before myself, no matter what the cost to me?

that you showed me how to slam the door on a black beggar,  
that you made me smell the newspaper boy's breath,  
that you warned me not to overfeed the char,

that you fed me all the lies, the fear, the hate, the death  
that's stinking in the barrel of that gun?

oh mama dear, when the revolution comes  
what will you say as we raise and point the guns?  
will you beg me not to shoot you?  
will you order me to save you?  
and when they call out fire! what shall I do?

### news report

the black belly situation is really serious.

all over the country black bellies are rumbling  
in huts and under bushes,  
from early morning through the night.

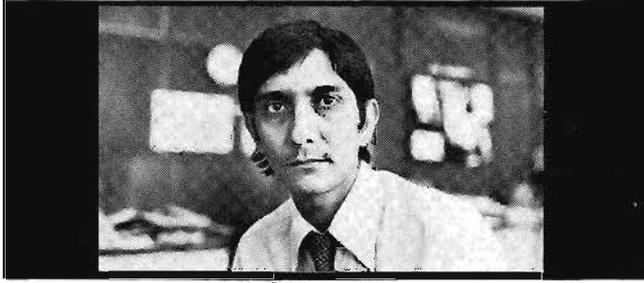
people are worried:  
they talk at meetings  
and over drinks.

in some areas the rumbling is still faint  
and could be mistaken for the sound of animals  
foraging in the wide veld beyond the farms.

but elsewhere the ground shakes  
as each black belly churns on its empriness  
making fine crystal quiver on tables.

people are worried:  
they talk in whispers  
as their children moan.

it is clear that the rumbling of bellies will grow stronger  
with every black child born  
and who can say how long the ground will hold  
under the huts and mansions of the worried people,  
talking at meetings, in whispers?



Achmat Dangor

**BULLDOZER**  
by Achmat Dangor  
(R6.50 — Ravan Press)

Reviewed by  
Tyrone August

The talented young Johannesburg writer Achmat Dangor has once again produced a fine work of art. It is a collection of poetry written over a period of about ten years, called *Bulldozer*.

It is a worthy follow-up to his novel and short stories published together as *Waiting For Leila*, but does lack some of the touches of brilliance he displayed in that extremely well-written and perceptive book.

What he does offer in *Bulldozer*, is a moving reflection of his thoughts and emotions about apartheid. He writes about it with profound anger and sadness.

In the title poem: 'Bulldozer', for instance, he sketches the havoc and destruction the Group Areas Act has caused in so many people's lives: 'Anne' lievens wa'/spat uit sy pad/en maa' weer wortels/erens innie modder/laat sak,' he comments bitterly.

Rootlessness and despair throb painfully throughout the collection. In 'Bulldozer IV,' he writes again: 'Ennie bulldozer kom/omnie hiewel ou broe/die laaste maal/jou huisie plat te ry,/hey waai man vegiet it/ dust word dust, ashes en as.'

Several poems reflect this theme. Dangor seems to be almost obsessed with the violence of the Group Areas Act and forced removals. (His theme in *Waiting For Leila*).

Through his writing it seems, he wants to exorcise it from his memory. Not successfully, though, as he picks up this theme time and again in the poems in the collection.

Dangor, who was born and grew up in Newclare, describes the pain of poverty in the township in 'Oppression': 'The smell of burnt-out candles/of ash in the stove/of carnality/of unwashed mouths . . . makes the stomach turn/perhaps the rotting floors,/or yet another wasted walk/to the blackened windows/They have chained my memory/to poverty.'

In 'The Guerilla,' the 35-year-old writer tells us about life in Riverlea, where he now lives: 'Riverlea/the place they call "Zombie-Town" . . ./The putrified air/of dust and darkness/ . . . icy dampness of cold ash/ . . . mud and shit.'

In the same poem he also tries to explore the reasons why a man flees the country of his birth and becomes a guerilla. He considers several possibilities, all linked to the system of political and economic oppression in South Africa.

Dangor nevertheless loves South Africa with a fierce passion. 'Paradise' and 'My Africa' illustrate this well. In 'Paradise,' he cries out in pain: 'Oh paradise cool paradise/of Africa/ . . . Oh why, why do you/tighten the chains?'

It is the cry of millions of people throughout the southern tip of Africa.

It is ironic that he sometimes speaks with the voice of an

exile. 'An Exile's Farewell' and 'An Exile's Letter Home' are poignant examples. Does it reveal a subconscious fear of ever leaving the land he loves so very much?

But *Bulldozer* is not only about gloom and pessimism, it is also about hope. In 'The Voices That Are Dead,' for example, he tells us: 'The midnight moon./white and cold/ over the ashen streets/reveals nothing but shadows fleeing from one darkness to the next.

'Mattera, Mohapi, Mathe,/Nortje, Nakasa/and you Brutus,/ names and voices that few remember/. . . Yet I can write of hope,/though the voice I hear/in the icy dawn/is still frail and tremulous.'

It is only a man of extraordinary vision that is able to write with such hope. Dangor, an exceptionally gifted writer, is such a man.

Despite the pain and suffering, he is still able to look ahead, and see a better tomorrow. It is remarkable for a man who has himself suffered so viciously at the hands of the apartheid Government — in 1973 he was banned for five years.

Before that, as leader of the Youth Movement of the Labour Party, he was also the subject of vigorous security police vigilance. He is thus not merely an observer from the sidelines, but an active participant in the struggle for a humane society in South Africa.

*Waiting For Leila* won the Mofolo-Plomer Prize in 1980. *Bulldozer* although not nearly as good, is another gem. It holds promise of so much more. ●



Mafika Gwala

**NO MORE LULLABIES**  
by Mafika Gwala  
(R4.95 — Ravan Press)

Reviewed by  
Tyrone August

The latest collection of poems of the Natal poet Mafika Gwala once again establishes him as one of the best poets in South Africa. It is more than a record of the pain and suffering of black people in this country.

*No More Lullabies* is also a powerful message of anger and resistance. But there is a crucial difference between him and so many other poets of the post-1976 era of black writing.

He realises that oppression is a universal phenomenon. It is not confined to South Africa, let alone apartheid. His poem 'Vo Nguyen Giap' is a masterful illustration of this.

It is about what he refers to as the 'imperialist aggression' of America in Vietnam. In the poem he hits out at the oppression in other Third World countries as well.

'The stars and stripes' were 'drenched in the blood of innocent children', writes Gwala. He also refers to Guinea-Bissau, Indochina and Mozambique — an indication of the man's vision.

Gwala shows he deserves the title of the people's poet. He calls on the oppressed people all over the world to resist

'until there will be no more master and slave in the four corners of the earth.'

'Long live the People's Revolution!' he cries. Another poem which illustrates Gwala's perception of world problems is the anguished 'Words to a Mother'.

Gwala's poetry is thus a far cry from the political rhetoric which is so characteristic of current writing in the townships. He does not only say: we are black and we are suffering. Period.

He says: We are black and suffering. But, he tells us, other people in other parts of the world are also suffering. And it is not only because of the colour of their skin.

It is because some people want to have wealth and power at the expense of others. It is because of an economic system which allows this kind of exploitation and perverse freedom — the freedom to exploit each other.

He shows an extreme sensitivity and an awareness of the root of the world's problems — the system of economic production in a society. It amounts to greed for economic and political power.

He sees the Boer victory over Dingaan as epitomising this struggle, and bitterly recalls it in 'The Covenant, Whose Covenant?' He angrily says that blacks have nothing to celebrate on December 16.

'As I look forward to a new covenant; I find you colour-hateful, December 16; turn your back; do not come back,' he screams out. He brilliantly contrasts June 16 with December 16.

'We've lost the June month; to a oneday memory; regurgitating "Unity is Strength"; with clenched fists,' he says. He goes on to say that no black is a terrorist but a freedom fighter.

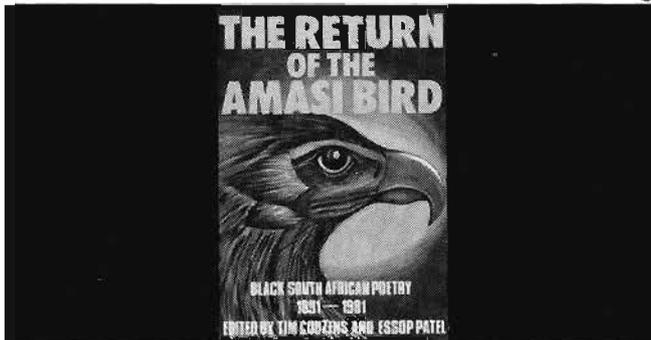
Constantly Gwala exposes the contradictions in South African society. And he does not do this in camouflaged language, but bluntly and fearlessly.

'As our heroes die; As our heroes are born; Our history is being written,' he continues in 'Afrika at a Piece.' Gwala — the poet, the political commentator, the man — is uncompromising.

It is the courage of a true artist. This is what has made him one of the leading poets of Southern Africa. In fact, he is developing into one of the leading poets of the Third World.

It is thus difficult to believe that his first collection of poems, *Joliinkomo*, was published as recently as 1977. But, then again, the writer draws on his whole life's experience.

And Gwala, like other black people, has a wealth of material to draw on.



**THE RETURN OF THE AMASI BIRD**  
eds Tim Couzens and Essop Patel  
(R8.95 — Ravan Press)

Reviewed by  
Tyrone August

Compiled by Tim Couzens and Essop Patel, *The Return of the Amasi Bird* is a valuable collection of bits and pieces written between 1891 and 1981.

Some of the poems lack aesthetic and literary qualities, but remain of importance as an historical record of black writing in the 19th century and early part of this century.

The editors do no attempt to pass them off as works of art either. In fact, they admit quite frankly that 'the early poems . . . are not presented with any exaggerated claim as to their literary merit.'

Some of the early poems are written in clumsy English. Others are written in a cumbersome, almost Victorian style.

At times this becomes extremely irritating and pretentious. But there are poems which are brilliant at a literary and political level. They are an effortless fusion of poetry and politics — fine examples of early protest reaction poetry.

The poem 'Africa: My Native Land', written by Mrs A Dube in 1913 when the Native Land Act was passed, is an example of the early theme of resistance.

'Struggle I must for freedom.'

'Till every drop of blood within my veins/ Shall dry upon my troubled bones, oh thou Dearest Native Land.'

It was published in *Ilanga Lase Natal*, one of the first black newspapers.

In another poem, written around 1891 by I W W Citashe, the theme of resistance is again set out articulately.

'Your rights are going!/ So pick up your pen, load it with ink/. . . Fire with your pen.'

The role of the poet was thus clearly defined early in the struggle for a more humane and democratic South African government.

The celebrated Cape writer Peter Abrahams picked up these threads half a century later.

In 1941, in a poem called 'Self', he wrote with passion: 'I'm a poet/ And through hunger/ and lust for love and laughter/ I have turned myself into a voice./ Shouting the pain of the people/ And the sunshine that is to be.'

The pioneering journalists Casey Mosisi, Can Themba and Ezekiel Mphahlele developed this further. Some of their best work is reproduced in the collection. *Drum* editor Stanley Motjuwadi followed in their footsteps.

Black poetry was given a powerful burst of life with the brilliant work of writers such as Arthur Nortje, Adam Small and Modikwe Dikobe in the early 60s. It was then that Oswald Mtshali hit the literary scene with a bang.

He was an important forerunner to the work of the black consciousness poets, who transformed the nature and direction of black writing in South Africa.

Mtshali's work elevated black poetry to a new stature.

It displayed a rich imagination and a mastery of the English language. 'The Cross-bearer', 'Carletonville' and 'Handcuffs' are excellent examples. It marked a new chapter in black writing.

Then came the angry and outspoken work of Siphos Sepamla, Mongane Serote and Mafika Pascal Gwala in rapid succession. They were dismissed as political activists and radicals.

But they ignored the vicious attacks on them by intellectuals and academics, and kept on writing.

Serote's 'Listen to Me . . .' can be interpreted as giving an insight into the rationale behind their writing.

'Daily through the centuries/. . . Made me, myself and I, vitriol,/ My scapegoat/ A thing to destroy./ You've been bloody cruel to me,/ Now you must listen to me . . .' he wrote angrily.

In 'Time Has Run Out,' he also wrote 'Our history is a

culture/of resistance/. . . We need the truth not fiction/ when we ask why./ we need to hear words/which, if the lips which make them, do tremble.'

Some fine writers have emerged from the ranks of the younger generation. There is Chris van Wyk, Hazel Johannesburg, Farouk Asvat, Jaki Seroke, Achmat Dangor, Shabbir Banoobhai, Ingoapele Madingoane and Essop Patel.

The work of poets such as James Matthews and Don Mattera, although part of the older generation of writers, also fits quite easily into the younger generation in terms of the content and style of their writing.

The anthology ends with the title poem, written by the exiled writer Daniel Kunene. It is a sad poem but has a touch of hope and optimism. This seems to sum up the general theme of the 300 poems in the *The Return of the Amasi Bird*.

Almost every single poem is a ruthless confrontation of reality, and an attempt to extract some spark of light from it. The human spirit needs something to uplift it, and carry it through oppression and pain.

This is what black South African writers have attempted to do — 'shouting the pain of the people/And the sunshine that is to be.' Younger writers have gone further, and openly call for resistance to bring an end to this pain.

Their writing no longer offers only an exposition of this pain. To quote Achmat Dangor: 'I no longer/sing with the/lyrical voice of the poet/. . . my tongue/has become as hard/and sharp/as the silence/of the rocks.'

The work of the 150 poets in the anthology also reflects the development of black newspapers and magazines. Some of the work was first published in *Ilanga Lase Natal*, *Bantu World*, *Iswi Le Kiri* and *Umteteli Wa Bantu*.

Later followed specialised literary publications such as *The Classic*, *Ophir*, *Contrast* and *Purple Renoster*. They paved the way for *Donga*, the short-lived *Wietie* and the still popular and widely read *Staffrider*.

*The Return of the Amasi Bird* provides an extremely useful documentation of black poetry written over a period of close to a century. The editors should be commended for compiling it into one volume.

'A MESSAGE IN THE WIND'

by Chris van Wyk

(Maskew Miller 1982) Illustrated by Peter Clarke

Reviewed by Marguerite Poland

Vusi's grandfather said, 'Vusi I'm sure you've seen me walking along the river bank after supper lately.'

'Yes *uBamkbulu*.' Where was this leading?

'Well, the reason I go there is to listen to the wind.'

'The wind *uBamkbulu*?' Vusi asked puzzled.

'Yes,' came the patient reply. 'I listen for a message in the wind.'

And so it is that Vusi Ngobesi hears of the message in the wind and of the ancient conflict between the Ngobesi and Mabaso tribes, divided for 300 years since the day the evil Letsike tried to poison the old chief Nomanzwakhe. Since that day no one has known who the rightful heir to the chieftdom is — Ngobesi or Mabaso.

Vusi's grandfather's great concern is to find the answer to this mystery. He has scant regard for education but he allows Vusi to go to school in order to find out the truth of the Mabaso/Ngobesi conflict for 'maybe the true story is written somewhere in the books in the great cities . . . I want you to read them and tell me what really happened.'

For Vusi this mission is only a means to realise his deepest

wish — to be educated like his friends Thami, Allan and Joseph. He has longed to go to school and always, his grandfather has refused to send him. In his desire to learn, Vusi has read avidly each scrap of newspaper he could find

But finally, with the help of his aunt and because of his grandfather's wish to know the truth of his tribe's past, Vusi is sent to school in the city.

He leaves behind him the river where he made stones skip on the water, the days out in the veld hunting guineafowl, the evenings drinking Aunt Lilian's *jabulani*, and exchanges them for the streets and yards of a township.

There he meets another kind of opposition — the fists and jeers of two classmates: He is a Ngobesi, they are Mabaso. The conflict, it appears, is as much alive in the township as it was three hundred years previously.

Vusi is assisted by Robert — a tall, bespectacled boy who commands the respect of his classmates — bullies included.

Robert leads Vusi into a new and exciting world which awaits them in Robert's backyard — where Robert is constructing a time machine from an enamel bath, two clocks, a car battery and the engine of a light aircraft.

With their time machine Vusi and Robert make a strange journey back through three centuries to a wild hillside — and find themselves in the heart of the Ngobesi/Mabaso conflict. Together, the boys witness the event that is the key to three centuries of hatred.

Chris van Wyk's story is a fine blend of reality and fantasy. It is also a book of contrasts — of past and present, of town and country, of Robert's electronic genius which makes magic possible and Vusi's talent as a ventriloquist which works its own — but different — kind of magic, as compelling as Robert's.

There is humour in the story too, which gives the book its warmth. There is an endearing portrait of grandfather and his preoccupation with his tribe, descriptions of the boys' pranks and of Robert's neighbour Mrs Nhlabatsi who is always shouting at them not to wake her baby with their noise — how could she know they'd just been part of a great moment in history? The real world always intrudes.

Chris van Wyk's introduction of this real world at such moments makes the whole incredible tale believable and possible.

Chris van Wyk's story is deceptively simple. With economy and directness he has conveyed his own messages in the wind with a distinctive subtlety.

The symbols of the bird's beak birthmark which appears on the forearms of some Ngobesis and the tribal spear embody the continuity of what has gone before with the lives of Vusi and Robert. Through them the boys have a tangible link with their ancestors. And having witnessed the past together, Vusi and Robert are the only ones who can interpret the mysterious message in the wind — not because they can hear it so much as because they have enacted, on their own, what the ancestors would have wished

There is very little indigenous literature for children in South Africa — even less for young adults. It is encouraging that a writer of Chris van Wyk's stature has contributed to it and set a standard for those that follow.

'A Message in the Wind' is an award-winning book (Maskew Miller Prize, 1981) by an award-winning writer (Olive Schreiner Prize for poetry 1979). It is a truly South African story which will be appreciated by all young people — no matter what their cultural background.

Let us hope that the message in the wind will be heard and remembered by those fortunate enough to read this book.

*For  
the  
Best  
in  
Print  
call*

***Blackshaws***

Cape Town (021) 54-3201 — Johannesburg Tel: (011) 339-1729

## ADVERTISE IN STAFFRIDER

For more details write to *Staffrider* or phone us  
at 642-5235

For orders and accounts, phone Ravan Press  
643-5552

SUBSCRIBE TO

# Frontline

Subscription rates for 12 issues:  
South Africa R12,00  
Rest of the World, R18 (surface mail)  
Please write for information on airmail rates.

FRONTLINE,  
P.O. Box 32219,  
Braamfontein 2017.

I attach my cheque/post order for R12,00. Please send  
me the next 12 editions.

Name: .....

Address: .....

phone: 39-6831

## THESE BOOKSHOPS ARE STOCKISTS OF THE FULL RAVAN RANGE:

BOOKWISE Jorissen Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, Tel. 396531/2

BOOKWISE Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, Tel. 8347206/7/8

BOOKWISE Roggebaai, Cape Town, Tel. 217444

CAMPUS BOOKSHOP Bertha Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, Tel. 391711

DE JONG'S BOOKSHOP Ameshoff Street, Braamfontein, 2001, Johannesburg, Tel. 393026

EXCLUSIVE BOOKS Pretoria Street, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, Tel. 6425068

GOGAS BOOKSHOP 53 Prince Edward Street, Durban

OPEN BOOKS Main Road, Observatory, Cape Town, Tel. 475345

LOGAN'S UNIVERSITY BOOKSHOP Denis Shepstone Building, Durban, Tel. 253221

MARKET THEATRE Cnr. Wolhuter & Bree Streets, Newtown, 2001, Johannesburg, Tel. 8321641

SHUTER AND SHOOTER Church Street, Pietermaritzburg, Tel. 58151

PILGRIMS BOOKSHOP Old Mutual Building, St. Georges Street, Cape Town, Tel. 226905 — Cavendish Square, Claremont,  
Tel. 643030

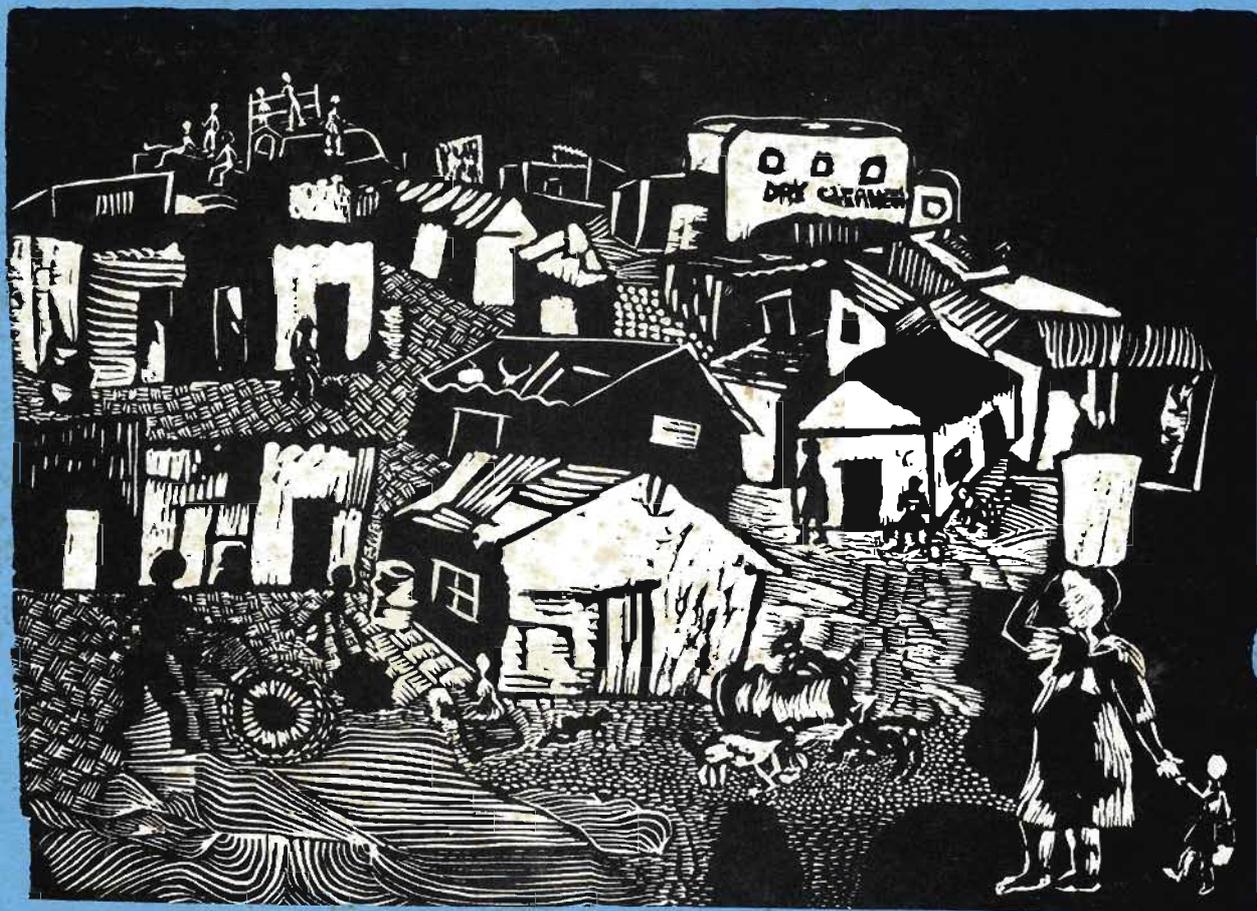
QUADRANT BOOKS Arcadia Centre, Pretoria

CAPE YOUNG BOOKS Main Road, Seapoint, Tel. 449544

UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND BOOKSHOP P/Bag X 1001, KwaDlangezwa, 3886, Tel. 351 93611

The following branches of the CNA carry a wide range of books by black writers, including the *Staffrider* Series:

Commissioner Street, Carlton Centre, Westgate Centre, Jeppe Street, Cnr. Harrison & President Streets, Life Centre  
(Commissioner Street), Sun City, Maseru, Umlazi.



A/P Removals III: People are living there Bongwiwe 83



A/P The Miners Bongwiwe 83