Staffrider

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Cover: Jeff Lok (Portrait of Richard Rive)

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COMMENT

As we enter the last decade of the twentieth century the transformative pressures which will come to bear on South African society and culture will be manifold. It can be expected that internal and external pressures to end apartheid and establish a non-racial democratic society will intensify. In accordance with this, radical cultural production will have to seek new ways of giving focus to the historical tasks of reflecting and shaping the experience and roles of the majority of South Africans committed to freedom and social justice. In opposition to this, it does not require clairvoyance to anticipate, that those in power, along with their apologists, will harness all their resources to extend the life of the status quo for as long as possible.

From the point of view of the cultural forces aligned to the national democratic struggle a number of tasks remain to be accomplished. The most important of these are the expansion of the cultural struggles of workers; the strengthening of the role of women in the production of culture; the advancement of the conceptualization and creation of a national people's culture and the establishment of informed, supportive and rigorous forms of cultural criticism. These daunting challenges and the organizational work they imply hardly represent the full range of cultural tasks that will confront South Africans in the years ahead. To give some focus to the nature of the challenges presented I would like to look briefly at each of the fields marked out above.

The labour movement has made considerable headway in the field of culture over the past decade. It has asserted its significance through its high visibility at worker, community and national gatherings. Its importance resides in the manner in which it complements, reflects and creates perspectives of the unfolding national democratic struggle from the perspective of workers. In addition, it projects the cultural needs of working people, not as some subordinate or inferior activity, but as a central force that is likely to influence the entire nature of future South African culture. What still remains to be accomplished is, firstly, the extension of cultural facilities to workers in rural communities and the agricultural sectors. Secondly, to widen and deepen the dissemination of knowledge and skills to workers who express a need for qualitative improvements in their cultural production. Thirdly, the projection of worker culture to the centre of local culture in ways that will enable it to influence the direction of South African culture as a whole. Since working people constitute the majority of the oppressed and exploited in this society it is essential that their political and cultural interests take priority. *Staffrider* is committed to facilitating this process on an on-going basis.

The traditional marginalization of women in processes of cultural production and their representation in publications and cultural forums have been widely voiced and well recorded recently. Within the labour movement and the wider democratic movement, as well as in related cultural and literary organizations, steps have been taken to redress the roles of women in all spheres of society. It is common cause that black working class women in urban and rural contexts constitute the most severely oppressed sectors of South African society. This means that a neglect or marginalization of gender issues will invariably weaken the broad emancipation of all the oppressed. If these issues are not given priority, they will result in distortions in the process of transformation fought for now and later at the point of social reconstitution.

Traditional perspectives which subordinate the rights of women to the strategies of national liberation must be abandoned in political and cultural struggles. The accentuation of the rights of workers in general and those of women in particular, along with the fundamental question of national liberation, will result in an overall strengthening of the national democratic struggle, and not a weakening or dilution, as is often argued. In addition, focus on the rights of women will ensure that the race, class and gender stratifications institutionalized under apartheid are dismantled in the transition to a new equitable social dispensation. In this regard women must lead rather than anticipate consideration and accommodation by organizations in which men have traditionally wielded power. *Staffrider* plans to foreground these issues in forthcoming editions.

The two areas delineated above are obviously closely linked to the question of developing a national people's culture in South Africa. This question, which has received scant and generally rather vacuous rhetorical treatment, will have to be addressed more cogently in the ensuing years. What should be clear from the outset is that prescriptive pronouncements from the top, concerning the specific content and ideology of a national democratic culture, will be of little value if mass participation at grassroots level is not allowed to take the initiative. It is only by means of this democratic process that substantial advances will be made. In this regard, oral literature and other traditional forms of art will have to be integrated into the written and other technologically based forms of art. Likewise, the role of the indigenous languages as vehicles for the creation and communication of aesthetics of liberation requires serious attention. While the national democratic struggle provides the broad framework for the creation of a democratic culture the central themes of this culture, it seems, will for the foreseeable future be an unequivocal opposition to race, gender, class and imperialist oppression. *Staffrider,* in conjunction with other progressive publications and cultural organizations, is committed to establishing forums for the discussion and development of issues related to the question of conceptualizing and building a democratic people's culture. In this regard it will be important to broaden the scope, themes and content of South African culture to include the full range of human experiences. It is increasingly becoming clear that narrow sectarian and dogmatic notions in literature and culture will have to make way for the actualization of freedom in creativity. It is by asserting the full complexity of human life that the value of freedom acquires its cogency.

It is obvious that no amount of abstract and decontextualized theorization, detached from concrete cultural production, regardless of its sophistication, righteous radical advocacy or critical import, will facilitate the wide-ranging challenges referred to above. And conversely, cultural production and practice devoid of theoretical reflection and critical intervention, no matter how sincere, is most likely to lead to a reproduction of the reactive cultural habits fostered under the influence of apartheid. What is now required is a renewal and expansion of the interrelationship between cultural theory and practice. In fact the coming years will severely test the efficacy of the relationship between theory and practice in all spheres of the democratic struggle. Thus, in the cultural field workers in the spheres of production and critical reproduction will be faced with challenges to give new shape to cultural practices on a wide front. The role of culture as a consciously constructed human enterprise, shaped by social forces and in turn capable of reshaping them, will have to be explored relentlessly. Under the

circumstances the broad thrust of progressive culture will be inscribed with the values of human and social emancipation. It is difficult to see any one, other than arch reactionaries, reject this.

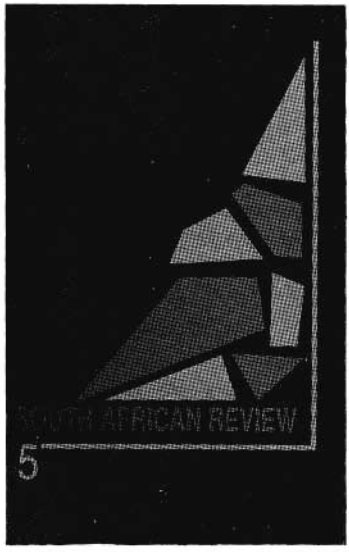
Staffrider invites all South Africans to participate in these areas as well as any other by sending contributions for publication to the magazine. This issue accordingly offers a number of related pieces in the form of Nadine Gordimer's essay on a people's literature, Stephen Gray's memoir of Richard Rive, a number of new short stories and poetry, a review and statements on a debate concerning the question of literary standards in poetry.

Visual artists and photographers are reminded of the annual *Staffrider* exhibition and awards which will distribute R4 000 to promising photographers, painters, sculptors and graphic artists in October this year. An advert and entry form for this purpose appears in this edition.

In conclusion, *Staffrider* congratulates Kelwyn Sole, who is a member of this magazine's editorial board, on winning the Olive Schreiner award for his collection *The Blood of our Silence* published by Ravan Press.

Andries Walter Oliphant

The Sexual Face of Violence: Rapists on Rape by Lloyd Vogelman
224pp *Ravan Press* **(R24-95)**



South African Review No. 5
Edited by Glenn Moss and Ingrid Obery for The South African Research Service
518pp *Ravan Press* **(R34-95)**

From the Roof, the Sky

Peter Esterhuysen

In December 1987 I moved into a block of flats in central Johannesburg. The building was old, broken-down and overcrowded. Despite the presence of so many people, though, it as an intense, lonely time in my life, an interregnum of indecision and unhappiness, deepened by the dank, claustrophobic ambience of the room I was renting, and the prospect of a Christmas spent on my own.

During the first month I made only one friend, an old black lady called Mary who cleaned my room once a week. Mary had been attached to this particular block of flats for over thirty years, and always asked me about my dreams. 'For the fahfee,' she explained.

One night I dreamed a particularly vivid dream. The next day sheer loneliness drove me onto the roof of the building. After I had hung up my washing I nervously crossed over to one of the lopsided, corrugated shacks that housed Mary and a little boy, her grandson, who spent his life on the stairs beside the Rastas, blowing a toy whistle. I knocked. After a while the door opened. Mary emerged.

'Hello, I thought you might have gone home for Christmas,' I said.

She shook her head. 'No money.'

'I had a dream last night.'

'Ah,' she said in her peculiar way. 'Would you like to come inside?'

I followed her into the small, dimly lit room with its raised bed, carefully made, and piled high with white linen. Her friend greeted me hesitantly as I entered and seated myself on a little stool. Feeling uncomfortable I began to relate my dream.

'Last night I dreamed that I was lying on my bed in the flat. Suddenly someone began to play a saxophone somewhere, the music was all at once sweet and rasping. I got out of bed and walked out into the passage. That haunting music permeated the whole building. I followed the sound down the stairs and out on to the pavement. But then it stopped, and all I could see was an old man shuffling away into the shadows.'

'Joe Makhene,' the other woman interjected, clicking, 'ki Eddie' and pointed at me. Mary nodded assent, and they both laughed.

'Joe?' I looked at them questioningly.

'Joe Makhene,' Mary explained softly, 'was a famous sax player who used to come round and play in this very building.'

I play the clarinet. 'Tell me about this Joe,' I said.

Mary shifted in her seat. 'It was in those days, those days when jazz was the thing. Every weekend the big bands would play, two, three bands in one night. The whole night. I was a young girl living with my sister. We'd go to listen and dance to the music, sometimes at the BMSC in Eloff Street, sometimes in halls in Sophiatown and Western Native Township. And the music was so big, so beautiful. And dangerous too. The gangsters would arrive to hear their favourite band. Ah, but when another band was playing they would fight and everyone would run out into the street, even the musicians with their instruments. Everyone would wait for the fighting to stop and then we would go inside again. We couldn't go home because of the curfew.'

'The gangsters loved Joe,' the other woman said.

'Ya,' Mary continued, 'they said that Joe was the best jazzman in the townships. He played in the biggest band, and when he played everybody came to watch. He also played in the suburbs. The papers said that he should go overseas. Eddie thought so too.'

'Eddie?'

'The owner's son. He used to stay in your room.' Mary touched her forehead. 'He had this long yellow hair down to his eyes. He was my friend, he wasn't like other white people. He would invite black people to his parties, all his friends from Sophiatown. One day he asked me to accompany him to the Odin in Sophiatown. That day Joe was playing. Not with the big band, just him and one two others. When he played – slow then fast, soft then loud – the audience went wild. Eddie loved jazz and he was very excited. ''That man,'' he said to me, ''could be the best in the world.'' Afterwards he went up to Joe and invited him to one of his parties They soon became good friends, Joe often used to come and practise on the roof. The other whites used to be wild with anger. But they couldn't do anything because Eddie was the owner's son!' She laughed wistfully.

'Eddie, he was always talking about Joe. ''Mary,'' he used to say, ''there is a new jazz sound coming out of the townships and it's going to put the world on fire. That's what the jazz critics are saying, look at King Kong!'' One day,' she paused, 'it was two days before Christmas, he came running into my room. His hair was standing up all over his head. ''Mary,'' he said, ''I have a

letter from a record company – they want Joe to go to America! Joe and you and all the others must come to my party tomorrow night. But don't tell Joe about America, I want it to be a surprise.'''

Suddenly mary stopped speaking. I could hear the roof contracting in the heat while the distant reggae music drowned out the incessant drone of the traffic below. My head swam in the heat and the pungent smell of linen. 'What happened then?' I asked.

'That night, the night of the party, as the sun was setting they came for Eddie in two big brown cars – the police. They took him away in the one. The other waited for the guests to arrive. Some of them the police took away too. Many months passed before we heard that he was going to be in court. When the trial ended, Joe and I walked down to the court building and stood in the crowd. He did not look up when they led him out, he looked very tired. A man in the crowd said that he was going to jail for six years. The next day his mother came and told me to clean the flat once a week until her son was free. I told her about Joe but she was very upset and didn't want to talk.' Mary paused once again.

'After that things didn't go well for Joe. The government passed new laws so that black musicians couldn't play to white audiences. They also didn't want blacks near the city so they knocked down Sophiatown, moved the people out to Soweto and closed the halls. The radios stopped playing jazz; soon people forgot about that music. Joe couldn't get work anymore, all the bands broke up. But still he used to practise his music. He wanted to stay good so that he could go to America. Sometimes he would come and play in this building, I knew he was waiting for Eddit,' she spoke in a tone suggesting disbelief and sadness.

'One day when I went down to clean Eddie's flat I saw a man in there. I shouted at him. But then he turned around and I saw that it was Eddie. He was happy to see me but he looked different, he was much older. We didn't talk for long, I told him that I must call Joe. He just smiled and looked sad from behind his eyes. I ran to my friend to send a message to the townships,' Mary said and shifted on her seat, clearly excited.

'Joe arrived while I was eating my lunch on the roof. I saw him hurrying along the street. And then I saw Eddie, he was walking down the street towards him. I shouted but they both walked straight past each other! Joe was so excited. We waited all afternoon and all evening too, but Eddie never came back to the room. After Christmas the owner came to me and said that I must move Eddie's things out of the flat. ''Eddie's gone away,'' she

said, "I am renting out the room." We moved everything out except for an old broken cupboard. Then we moved a bed in. The next year there was a new person.' She wiped her eyes and was silent.

I swallowed hard and asked: 'What happened to Joe?'

She seemed reluctant to speak, but after a while she continued: 'After that he really changed. He began to drink more and more and to smoke dagga, all day. But sometimes, on Thursdays, in the afternoon, he would feel in the mood. He would come around with his saxophone and play on top of the roof. But the white people started complaining and so he had to go away. I never saw him after that. One day my cousin told me that he had died from his heart.' She looked at me with an expression which suggested that her story was over.

I left Mary's room with a sense of deep quiet within. Outside, the sky was a soft blue, streaked with the sand of my mind's impress. As I moved down the stairs my neighbour, Mr Campbell, a large corpulent man with an Afrikaans accent, blocked my way. He told me that he was getting all the white people in the building to sign a petition calling for the eviction of the black and Indian tenants. 'Johannesburg must become white again. We must act soon to stop the rot, the decay . . .' I shook my head and brushed past him. 'You'll regret it,' he shouted after me, 'when more of them move into the city and things become even worse than they are now.' As he stomped away I heard him shouting at the little boy.

I did not dream again that night but I was aware that Mary's story was churning around deep within; the next morning I found myself in the dark basement of the public library paging through the old, bound newspapers. Between the beehive hairdo's and coy advertisements, the headlines incremented the story: *Edward Greenberg Detained. Communist Gets Six Years.* Several years later: *Greenberg Released – Flees South Africa.* And then as final postscript: *Minister of Justice: Greenberg Now With Banned Organization.*

It was early afternoon as I made my way back to the flat. The streets, darkened by the gathering clouds, were crowded with last-minute Christmas shoppers. Different races jostled in the same, seemingly endless queues, and my sense of loneliness increased with every queue, my feeling of alienation with every poster headline: *City Bomb Scare.*

Back in the flat I lay on my bed. A pit of nausea unfolded in my stomach. My thoughts gravitated endlessly towards the story of Joe

and Eddie. My eyes traced the contours of the dark, dingy room. All that remained of Eddie and Joe besides these bleak walls was the small, broken closet.

Some time during that long, hot afternoon I moved across to the closet and, using my pocket knife, began to unscrew the hinges. The many scratch marks told me that I was not the first tenant to succumb to curiosity. After removing the screws, I pulled the door towards me and peered into the gloom. The cupboard was filled with newspapers, piles of old newspapers. At first I turned away. I had had enough of old papers. But soon I returned and began to pull out the yellowed pages full of stories of gangsters, good-time girls and jazz!

When I moved the last pile it seemed unusually heavy and toppled over on the floor, revealing, from within a sea of discoloured pages, several coverless books and a box wrapped in newspaper. With feverish haste I began to unwrap the box. When I prised the lid off there was a momentary glint of light. In the box, fully assembled, lay a gleaming alto saxophone and an envelope, and in the envelope there was an air ticket to America for Joseph Makhene.

Overwhelmed by the afternoon's sudden transformation I paused before running out into the passage and up the stairs onto the roof, clutching the saxophone against my heaving chest. I had something for Mary! The sky was a roaring mass of cloud, wind, and lightning, the shacks, cardboard-like in the mauve shadows, appeared to be deserted. I banged on the door again and again. Another door opened.

'Where is Mary?' I asked the young girl who appeared.

'Mary, she's gone home,' she smiled. 'She won the fahfee.'

'What?'

'She played number four, the dead man.'

Stunned, I steered myself to the roof's edge and stared out at the evening city. Christmas eve. Twenty-six years ago they had pulled up in the street below. And the boots on the stairs. Twenty-six years ago they had taken Edward away. Clogged highways glistened like necklaces strung out over the city, suspended between the railway line and distant pink mine dumps – the chains of a people possessed by dreams. I stared down at the street. Two black prostitutes were laughing at Mr Campbell who was weaving a drunken path towards the entrance. Suddenly the wind tore through me as I lifted the saxophone, and took the mouthpiece between my lips. I raised my eyes until I could only see the purple, and began to blow and blow and blow . . .

The Coon

M. Cassiem D'Arcy

Alexander Hector Meintjies lived in upper Ashley Street, only a stone's throw from pseudo-gentry. A few more roads eastwards and you would be in Walmer Estate, home of the upper-crust of coloured society. This is where Mr Meintjies wanted to reside, that is, once he had obtained the much sought-after post at Trafalgar High School, the premier coloured high school of the day.

From time to time Mr Meintjies had to attend New Unity Association meetings at the chairman's mansion in Walmer Estate. On these occasions he felt decidedly uncomfortable, almost as if he was trespassing. The New Unity Association was a breakaway group of the United Movement, itself a splinter group of the All United Alliance, a sub-committee of the Anti-Cad. The members of the Association spoke in eloquent, impeccable English on various topics, ranging from Bach's fugues to such esoteric subjects as the influence of the tides on the mind. Mr Meintjies was rather silent on these occasions, for he was acutely conscious that he was from District Six and was aware that this was patently evident in his accent. But he was working on it. He was now in his fourth year of studies for his B.A. through the correspondence courses of the University of South Africa. He watched and listened as the erudite members of the Association sipped sherry and nibbled canapes over long discussions of the disunity in the anti-government movements, and sniffed brandy as they mulled over the latest ten-point programme for the redistribution of land and amenities in the *new* South Africa after the revolution, the imminence of which they had little doubt of.

'Oh, Alex can do culture,' said the chairman and leader of the party offhandedly when it came to portfolio-time.

Mr Meintjies squirmed in his chair. Culture had been tossed to him almost as an aside. To make matters worse, the chairman had addressed him as 'Alex'. 'Alex!' The condescending indignity of being addressed in a formal meeting by his first name was almost too much for him to swallow. But swallow he did, for it was his first recognition by the leader. Culture was low on the rung of priorities and it pained him greatly that the hierarchy had not seen fit to apportion him a more senior and prestigious post, but he resigned himself to the fact that fate had dictated that he had to work himself up to the top in all his worldly endeavours. He would show

them the mettle he was made of. Soon they would have to reconsider his true worth.

The party had a rich library of clichés. Their banners often blared 'UNITY IS STRENGTH', 'WORKERS UNITE', 'JUSTICE FOR ALL', but it was not these that excited Mr Meintjies. It was 'COONERY IS BUFFOONERY' that raised his ire to such great heights that he saw red. In his new portfolio he was going to do his best to expose the sins of coonery and to eradicate it by its very roots. How could a human being lower himself to cavort through the streets of Cape Town with face smeared black and white, prance to tunes cacophonous to the ears, and to crown it all, expose himself to blatant exploitation by the white oppressors, who organized the lucrative carnivals and reaped the benefits of the tourist trade. No, the sins of coonery were cardinal. Coons were degrading; the very word *coon* was anathema to him. A feeling of revulsion shot through him when he saw the laughing, toothless black and white painted faces on the front pages of the daily newspapers at New Year-time. The immediate eradication of coonery to restore the dignity and worth of the coloured was vital to the cause. As new Minister of Culture in the Association he had to start painfully at the very foundation of upliftment. It was his calling so to speak, and even though the New Unity Association had scant time for religion, *the opium of the people,* he had to rescue the masses from their sins.

The teacher in him stirred; an orderly mind leads to orderly progress. He had to make a survey and draw up a report of action. Suddenly he realized that he knew virtually nothing about the coons. True, he knew that they painted their faces and sang and danced their way through Cape Town on New Year's day and then competed at Green Point track for large silver cups, but further than that, he was faced with a big blank. A two-line report would never do. That would entail losing face at the report-back meeting. No, the dossier would have to be at least half a volume thick in order to impress the degreed elite of the party.

Research; that was the answer. A scholar should research his work thoroughly before he puts pen to paper. It was an old maxim but still valid. How would he go about it? He could ask some coons to detail some of the questions bothering him. That wasn't a very good idea. They froze up when they heard him speak. He had not forgotten a sobering episode:

'Mommy, why is that man speaking with marbles in his mouth?' asked one youngster as he was conversing with an errant

student's mother. The horrible child was insistent despite the acute discomfort of the mother and the embarrassment of Mr Meintjies, who had been listening studiously to the BBC for months to improve his English accent so that his diction could be on a par with the others in the Association.

Mr Meintjies realized that he would have to be a little circumspect in his research efforts. His new accent was a little off-putting to the culturally unsophisticated. However, for the sake of the cause and for scientific endeavour, he was prepared to regress back to his *Sout Efriken-District Six* accent.

In a moment of lapse, Mr Meintjies called his sister in a soft affected tone, 'Anneline . . . Anneline.'

'Whatse Anneline, Anneline issit? I'm Annie. Whatyouwant?'

'Anne . . . Annie where would you go if you wanted to know all about the coons.'

'You want to join 'em?'

'Don't jest Annie,' said Mr Meintjies in a rather pedantic voice. 'I'm doing scientific research on the coons.'

'Onne coons?' asked an incredulous Annie. 'What's scientific about 'em?'

'It's for educational reasons. We have to plan.'

'They don't need planning. They just run round the streets on New Year's day and have a jolly time. Waste of time this planning.'

'You don't understand. It's for the future.'

'You're going to form a troupe of your very own? Make it a "Bits and Pieces." I like them. They're so funny.'

'Annie!'

'What's it then?'

'Never mind. Just tell me where I can find someone who can tell me all about the coons.'

Annie tapped her forehead for a moment or two.

'Go to the Seven Steps about four o'clock and you'll see a man standing there, he's always there about that time, and tell him I sent you. His name is Boeta Gamiet. He's famous for something else but that doesn't matter. Just ask for Boeta Gamiet. Everybody knows him . . .'

'Okay, okay, thanks. Isn't it rough in that area? I hate going past there.'

'No. It's safe if they know you or if you're as stuffy as you are. No, they never interfere with teachers. I suppose they're frightened that you might be carrying the cane with you.' She tittered at her

little tweak of teasing.

Mr Meintjies duly went to the Seven Steps and as his sister, Annie, predicted, he found Boeta Gamiet lounging around at the appointed time.

'Er . . . er. Boeta Gamiet?'

'Yes, Sir, Mr Teacher, *Meneer*?'

'How did you know I'm a teacher?' asked Mr Meintjies in alarm, for he had been trying his best to be nondescript and unaffected.

'I knows what I knows,' answered Boeta Gamiet.

It was vexing.

'My sister, Anneline, said . . .'

'Who?'

'Annie Meintjies.'

'Oh Annie . . . know her well.'

'Know her well?' asked Mr Meintjies, half to Boeta Gamiet and half to himself. That statement sounded pregnant with innuendo. He hoped that this dubious status of his sister would not be linked to his position. He had worked too hard to rise above the *masses* to see his status now in ruins and ashes.

'Annie buys fish from me.'

'Oh,' said Mr Meintjies, visibly relieved.

'What does *Meneer* want?'

'I'd like to know where I can find someone who knows all about the coons and their organizations.'

'*Meneer* wants to join?' asked Boeta Gamiet, somewhat taken aback by the unusual request.

'No. Of course not,' answered an indignant Mr Meintjies. These people are infuriating. But then one must have patience with the *masses*. It's a question of grey matter, Mr Meintjies thought to himself. 'I'm doing a scientific study . . .'

'But science is all inne books already. They teach it all the time. My son, Amien, studied science at school; almost turned him into a heathen. *Meneer* must *pasop* for science.'

'No, you don't understand. I'm doing research on the coons.'

'Too much research isn't good for the brains. *Meneer* will land up in Valkenberg, there where the mad people are. The coons? How can one do research onne coons? They just march and they sing.'

Exasperated, Mr Meintjies implored, 'Just tell me where I can find someone who knows about the coons.' His nerves and patience were paying a heavy price for the benefit of science.

'*Meneer* must go to Caledon Street and ask for Mr Levy. He

makes clothes for the coons.'

'But Caledon Street is a very long street.'

'Doesn't matter. Everyone knows Mr Levy. Just ask. Tell Mr Levy I sent *Meneer*.'

Mr Meintjies made his nervous way up the Seven Steps and through the alleyways to Caledon Street. The first urchin he met ran away before he could open his mouth. A voice from an open doorway shouted, 'What does *Meneer* want?'

'I'd like to know where Mr Levy lives, the one who makes clothes for the coons.'

'It's too early for the *klops-gear, Meneer*.'

'I'm not having clothes made. I just want to speak to him.'

'Oh. He stays over there.'

'Thanks.' Mr Meintjies wondered whether it would be all worthwhile in the end.

Mr Levy was a tall affable man with Javanese features except for the large limpid eyes. At forty he was already balding. He greeted Mr Meintjies with due courtesy and welcomed him to the little room that served as both living room and working area. The room was littered with an array of colourful costumes in a myriad colours. He quickly hid some of the costumes behind folds of cloth.

'The colours are secret till New Year's day. Got to honour my promises to the competing teams.'

Mr Meintjies understood and filed the information in his memory: 'Clothing colours a secret till New Year's day.' Every bit of information was useful.

Mr Levy sat on a straight chair behind his Singer sewing-machine.

'And what can I do for teacher?'

'Here we go again,' thought Mr Meintjies. 'How can it be so obvious to all of them that I'm a teacher.' But he left it at that. All the books he had read on Eastern culture made mention of the 'devious mind of the oriental'. It seemed to him that the whole of District Six was populated by orientals or orientally influenced minds with various measures of deviousness.

'I'm coming about the coons.'

Mr Levy looked at him perplexed. Teachers were well known to be violently anti-coon. His piece of bread depended on his nimble fingers making those colourful costumes.

'The coons?'

'Yes, the coons.' Mr Meintjies sensed that he had inadvertently put Mr Levy on his guard. He tried to be more at ease. 'I'm

making a study of them.'

'A study?'

'Yes, you know, research. I'm writing a report on them.'

'Oh, I see,' said Mr Levy, looking a little more relieved. 'Teacher's writing a book on the coons. Why didn't teacher say so inne first place. I understand.'

'No, I'm not writing a book. I'm just writing a report.' Mr Levy looked puzzled once more. 'Oh what the hell,' thought Mr Meintjies to himself. 'A book, sort of.' A smile crossed Mr Levy's face once more. He understood.

'Would my name be in there?'

'Of course.'

'Teacher must make sure; my name is Ebrahim, not Braima, as everyone calls me. Teacher must write it down.'

Mr Meintjies duly recorded this piece of information in a little notebook to humour Mr Levy. Mr Meintjies tapped the pencil on his little book and mentally urged himself to patience, patience, patience. The mental speed of the masses was as slow as asses.

'Now what does teacher want to know?'

A long discussion followed. Mr Meintjies, to his surprise, found that Mr Levy was not so dumb after all. The long history of the coons, from the time they started after the tour of a black and white-faced minstrel group from the United States of America at the end of the last century to the present time, was discussed in detail. A wealth of information poured out as Mr Levy waxed lyrical on his favourite subject. He did not agree with all aspects of the institution of coonery but it was his living. Circumstances sometimes forced one to compromise one's principles. Mr Meintjies nodded in assent with the sage words. Tea was served accompanied with fluffy jam tarts. Mr Meintjies consumed the whole plateful and then more tea was served until both were surprised to hear the voice of the *muezzin* hailing the sunset prayers from the nearby minaret. With effusive thanks Mr Meintjies took his leave, promising to return soon.

That night was a long one for Mr Meintjies. He just could not rest. He tossed and turned but sleep would not come to his hyperactive mind. In the small hours of the morning he was still wrestling with his newfound bundle of information. Bleary eyed, he got up when the backyard cocks started to crow and made himself some coffee. The subject was fascinating. He had new insight into the problem, yet, he could not fathom the real spirit of coonery. What made the illiterate and uneducated masses burst with

jubilation on New Year's day despite the appalling misery in which they lived? This conviviality was beyond reason. He was determined to fathom its depths. A return visit to Mr Levy was imperative.

'I knew that teacher was coming back,' said Mr Levy, not in the least surprised to see Mr Meintjies back so soon.

'Yes?' asked Mr Meintjies still a little wary of eastern inscrutability.

'That night after teacher left last week, I had a dream that teacher joined the coons and sang at the Green Point track.'

'Yes?'

'My dreams never fail me. They all come true. We'll have to make teacher a costume.'

'Preposterous!' thought Mr Meintjies. 'Me, Alexander Hector Meintjies, a respected high-school teacher, a coon dancing down the streets in full view of all, and then, to crown it all, singing at Green Point track in front of thousands of spectators? The very notion is ridiculous.'

'And what troupe would teacher like to join?' asked Mr Levy patiently.

'Impossible.'

'Only a coon can know what it feels like to be a coon,' said Mr Levy, waiting for Mr Meintjies to select his troupe as if it was a foregone conclusion that Mr Meintjies would act out his dream.

'Mr Levy is joking,' said Mr Meintjies with a slightly nervous giggle. He saw the seriousness on Mr Levy's face. He realized that he would have to humour Mr Levy if he was to get more information out of him.

'Here, try this jacket on.' Mr Levy reached for a particularly colourful jacket and slipped it over the shoulders of a reluctant Mr Meintjies. 'There, it's made for you.'

Mr Meintjies protested but Mr Levy took no notice.

'Galiema bring the paints.' Galiema brought the face-paints. 'Sit still!' commanded Mr Levy. 'Take off your spectacles.'

Mr Meintjies sat still, not saying a word as Mr Levy applied the paints; white round the mouth and the rest of the face a jet-black. Mr Levy smiled as he placed two large black dots on the ear lobes for accent. 'There, look in the mirror.'

The reflection in the mirror was slightly out of focus and unrecognizable. The new face in the mirror was not his; gone was the dour demeanour and serious furrows on the forehead. He made a funny face; the image in the mirror smiled back at him,

then both men laughed out loud. Mr Meintjies was in the coons.

At first there was a great deal of reticence on the part of the captain of the Dixie Darkies to accept Mr Meintjies as a member but Mr Meintjies oiled the way with a large bottle of Oude Meester brandy. After a few rounds the social and educational gaps became somewhat hazy and they all sang together as if they had been life-long friends. The songs had vim and bounce, the words were spicy and titillating. Mr Meintjies's beloved Mozart melodies and *Deutsche liedere* took a decided backseat in the little courtyards in which they practised. And yet, it was a serious business for they were going to compete for silver cups meriting their prowess in singing, song composition, originality in dress colour and design and the big floating trophy for overall team excellence. For two years running the Dixie Darkies had been the champions and they were not about to relinquish their hold on the prestigious trophy.

He was mad. Mr Meintjies knew deep in his heart that he was mad to have embarked on this personal foray into the world of the coons but by now he was too deeply enmeshed to extricate himself honourably. The members of the team had been sworn to secrecy and this they would faithfully adhere to as long as he was there to see that they did not divulge his involvement. Liquid refreshments helped to thicken their tongues and aided a convenient loss of memory considerably. Many times he thought of pulling out but that would have meant being branded a 'chicken', and to still the outraged loquaciousness of the hundred or so men, who had adopted him onto their team against their better judgement, was no easy matter. He was trapped by his own naïvety and he would have to pay the penalty all the way.

However, he had one consolation: he was doing it for science.

His eyes were open and his ears to the ground. He recorded their meetings, discussions of their dress, the composition of their songs and their general conduct. He was surprised in many ways. He found that all were not from the hoodlum element nor were they all thieves and rapists but that the majority were somewhat simple in their demands on life and enjoyed the camaraderie. Many turned out to be talented musicians and designers. Discipline was strict. Errant members were fined. He noted with interest that the crime rate just before the carnival actually dropped. None of the members wished to spend their jolliest time of the year behind bars.

New Year's day was bright and sunny. Mr Meintjies was

disappointed. He had hoped for a dark, dismal rainy day so that the crowds would be sparse and chances of his detection minimized. His moment of truth had arrived.

The team looked splendid in their blue and white costumes, and red ribbons fluttered in the breeze. They sang lustily to warm up their tonsils and tapped their canes to the beat of the melody. Here and there a joker twirled his top-hat high above their heads on the long white canes they sported. The captain blew a shrill whistle, the *voorloper* twisted her hips, bounced a little, threw her long baton high into the air and caught it on the move as they sang and danced their way down Caledon Street.

The rhythms and uninhibited prancing were infectious. Mr Meintjies sought a safe position deep in the body of the troupe, away from recognizing eyes. At first he just walked along but soon he was caught up in the merriment of the day and he bounced along with the best of them, singing with all his heart and soul the newly-composed songs, the lyrics of which often had no particular meaning, as long as they flowed with the music. New Year's day was not an occasion for plaintive love songs nor was it a day for pop-philosophers.

The singing and dancing continued non-stop all the way up Wale Street to the Bo-kaap and then downhill to the Green Point track. They sweated in the hot sun and marched and danced till their joints ached and sang till their throats were parched. The competition was fierce and Mr Meintjies was there in the thick of things. In a moment of sheer delirium he jumped to the front row and belted out a few lines in a falsetto octaves higher than the rest of the team. The audience jumped to their feet in unbridled ecstasy and clapped furiously. Mr Meintjies was close to tears with joy.

High up in the stand a schoolgirl, who had been in Mr Meintjies's class, rubbed her eyes and pulled at her ears. For one brief moment she thought that she was seeing Mr Meintjies, the staid and upright Mr Meintjies, down there on the podium in the middle of Green Point track, singing his heart out. Such a preposterous thing would not happen in a million years. She was sure that the heat of the day was playing tricks with her senses.

At the close of the day the troupe jumped on the back of an open lorry and made their way back to the *klopskamer,* their headquarters in Caledon Street. They were tired, weary and completely hoarse. For Mr Meintjies it had been a truly memorable day. He had never been so uninhibitedly happy in all his life.

A few Saturdays later the finals of the competition were completed and the largest trophy went back to Caledon Street and the Dixie Darkies. The celebration was somewhat sad for friendships would part and hibernate for another year. For Mr Meintjies it was doubly so, for he had to spin the cocoon of respectability once more around him. He knew that it would strangle his innate joy and happiness, which had flourished for a brief shining moment.

The report was a lengthy one; a prize social document. It concluded: Carnivals, such as the coon carnival, bring joy to many whose lives are drab, dull and without meaning. However, they have their degrading aspects. Yet, before any person or organization can condemn them, it behoves that person or organization to substitute a better, a more meaningful and a more joyous festival without the trappings of sentimentality and condescension. Empty condemnation is a sterile exercise.

The well-researched social document, painstakingly compiled by Mr Meintjies, was duly handed to the chairman of the New Unity Association at the very first meeting of the year. Without so much as glancing at the contents the chairman pushed it to one side, adjusted the belt of his new mohair suit, and continued with a long harangue against exploitative capitalism. Before the next meeting a split occurred in the party and Mr Meintjies's report was mislaid. It never ever saw the light of day.

He Needs Milk

Karren Visser

Since Frans got married a year ago, he has not stopped eating. He just manages to squeeze behind the steering wheel, burps loudly and fumbles for the key under the stretched flesh of his stomach. His wife, Magriet, is busy strapping a baby into his safety chair on the back seat.

The baby, ten months old, looks just like his father.

Magriet hardly moves in the passenger seat. She is worrying: did she put the disposables in the baby bag? Frans does not think about nappies, bottles or dummies. But he likes milk. His wife can never give him enough. He likes to sit in front of the television with a plate of his mother-in-law, Hester's, cookies or fig preserve and a glass of milk.

His wife brings him more when he shouts for it. Most evenings he sits staring at the screen in the grey drinks cabinet. Magriet is in the kitchen, washing up after the meal. He is twenty-two. She, twenty-one. Her mother told her to do a course, secretarial or something. But then she met Frans and it was made very clear that if they had plans she must marry him before he starts taking advantage.

They are on their way to Hester's place in Paarl. She lives opposite the hospital just next to the reform school. A few months back, two of the dormitories in the boarding school burnt down. Some girls were found smoking dagga so they were moved to the Tokai reformatory.

Hester has made Chinese for supper. This time with litchis in chutney instead of yellow rice and raisins. He likes meat – not this rubbish. What is there to eat but a couple of strips of carrot and slivers of chicken skin. His Ma-in-law lives by the budget. Even her toilet paper is one-ply.

The old lady does not allow drink in the house. So Frans goes to the car and pours himself a strong brandy. He puts the mug on the dashboard before leaning over the passenger's seat and pulling a litre of Coke out of the cool bag.

Hester married an alcoholic. He used to beat her and his daughter up until one of the matrons at the reform school heard what was happening and reported him to the police. He died in the rehabilitation centre. Hester once said she did not think he could live without the stuff in his system.

Frans drinks but he eats enough not to get drunk. He always

wants more. And if he does not get it, he lies on top of her at night so that she can hardly breath. He comes too quickly. Like syrup it sticks to the waffled layers of fat, and further down, mats her hair.

Magriet is scared. She has a fear of losing control. She does not drive. Once she saw a smash on the highway. A woman and her baby were squashed flat. After the jaws of life had prised the roof away from the chassis the two looked like fish-paste smeared onto the upholstery.

Frans sucks Magriet's nipples. His son lies in a cot at the end of the bed sucking his bottle. As he lets go of the teat, air is trapped in his bottle making strange gurgling noises. Frans has forgotten about his teeth but Magriet says nothing. The brandy has dulled his senses and he does not taste the blood.

In the bathroom she squeezes the gash and watches a red bead form and slowly move down a hair and over her swollen breast. She dabs the wound with cotton wool dipped in antiseptic.

He lies waiting for his glass of milk. She looks over the side of the cot. The baby is asleep with the teat hanging out of his mouth. She puts her fingers into his waterproof and feels between his legs curled up with the soles of his feet touching one another. Gently she moves the bottle away from his face but close enough in case he wants it during the night.

She gives Frans his milk. He can never get enough. Not even of Hester's fig preserve. Sometimes he bites and the sugary juice runs between his fingers and down his palms. He licks the sweetness and wipes his hands on his shirt.

When they get home, Magriet will tell him that he eats like a pig. And shame on him, in front of her mother who must think he never has a meal at home. He does not say anything.

He just gets on top of her again pushing his face through her permed curls into the pillow while he moves his legs like a frog desperately trying to get its bloated body onto a rock before it drowns.

A Letter to the Mayor

Deena Padayachee

You know I've seen them come and go, these Mayors our fair city has been blessed with; but this latest specimen takes the cake. Now don't get me wrong. Old Potz is as over-worked and bothered as the best of them. But when the hell will he stop getting so damned mad over the pin-pricks that are part of the job?

Now, twenty or so anonymous letters from nut-cases and subversives in one week is really par for the course. Of course he gets more than the rest used to receive; I suppose it's because he was always so honest about his priorities.

I mean he used to be quite open about who the beaches were made for. And he knew where he wanted the non-whites to exist. But when he gets angry, God, the way he shouts isn't good. Not good at all. Like now.

'HENNIE!'

You could hear the scream right down the hall. When the Mayor is cross, he hates to use the intercom. He *sommer* can lose control. And holler like a cat with its tail on fire. Don't be fooled. Being Mayor's secretary isn't all that great.

'Coming, Your Worship.'

I entered the elegant wood-panelled Mayoral Parlour with its newly installed TV and video recorder. We had an up-to-date Mayor this time. All the pictures of non-whites had disappeared from the walls. The last Mayor had been a liberal. Or maybe he had wanted to impress his overseas visitors. However, Mayor Potz hated hypocrisy. The Mayor sailed into me with all his guns firing:

'Would you believe the nerve of this sub.? He wants a Hall of Fame for Tegwhite's most famous rate-payers. And he wants that coolie, Gandhi in it; what is this world coming to?'

A 'sub.' is Mayor Potz's term for a subversive person.

He continued: 'But for this masterpiece I'll need the State Security Police.' And he waved a letter at me. I saw that the envelope was post-marked 'Tegwhite'. I took the sheet of computer paper and scanned the lines; it was headed:

WOULDN'T IT BE WONDERFUL?

It had fifteen points. Some of the most provocative ideas I've seen sent to a Mayor since I became Mayoral Secretary. Shame! What we have to put up with in this badly-lit part of Africa, in order to bring civilization to the natives! You'd think that after more than

one hundred years of our benign rule they would at least have become developed enough to be a little more grateful.

'Make ten copies,' barked the Mayor, 'and get me Major Oosthuisen.'

I made eleven copies. And listened in on old Oosthuisen listening to old Potz. (Or Potty as the Tegwhite Corporation workers had dubbed him.) He'd been a City Councillor for more than twelve years now.

'. . . this will never do, Andries! We must track down the scoundrel and nail him!' I overheard the Mayor say to Oosthuisen.

'Actually, Your Worship, we in the SSP are very happy when the terrorists expose themselves by writing to important people within our system like your esteemed self,' said Oosthuisen. 'We always trace them. And then we know one more person to keep tabs on. Our system is like smoke that makes the vermin come out of the woodwork. I can assure you, Mr Mayor, that we are very grateful to you for being so helpful.'

Mayor Potz: 'But I feel like damned fly-paper!'

Oosthuisen: 'You are part of our very valuable eyes and ears, Mr Mayor. And I know that you are a true patriot. You will simply see the flies, Mr Mayor. They don't have to stick to you. We will swat them. And by seeing just how filthy the vermin are, you can help to improve the morale of our people when their Christian consciences are occasionally pricked by some aspects of our system. Send me the letter, Your Worship, and I will do what is necessary.'

Mayor Potz: 'I wonder when our citizenry will accord to you wonderful people the real recognition, respect and salaries you deserve?'

Oosthuisen: 'Have a good day, Mr Mayor.'

His voice was measured, and the words precise and terse. A man in complete control. The Mayor seemed like a spoilt school-boy in comparison. I, too, heaved a sigh of relief after I put the phone down.

I read the 'Wonderful' letter:

'1. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all the Mayors of Tegwhite had to live in non-white suburbs like Colourstan or Fenix?
2. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all Tegwhite City Councillors had to live at least three months of the year in non-white suburbs like Old Lands East?
3. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the City Engineer could be persuaded to live in the African area of Kwa-Much for just a month?

4. How I would rejoice if I could make the Head of Parks and Gardens live among the wild bushes and weeds of non-white suburbs like Cato More or Clerman Township.
5. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Head of Tegwhite's Municipal Library was forced to live in a suburb like Reserve-on-the-Hills where there is no library?
6. If only we could make the children of the Library Head use only the Stanmake Library, where the library stock is a disgrace.
7. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Tegwhite Chief Postmaster had to live in Parlick where there is no post office?
8. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Head of Hospital Services would live in Fenix where the two hundred thousand people have no hospital?
9. Wouldn't it be simply superb if we could persuade the Minister of Health to live in Stinger and have a heart-attack where there are no Specialist Physicians and no coronary care facilities?
10. How marvellous it would be if the District Commandant of the Tegwhite Police had to live in Reserve-on-the-Hills where there is no police station.
11. How magnificent if the Administrator of Natal was made to live in Fenix and his wife tried to find a Hypermarket.
12. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Head of the Cleansing Department was forced to live in Bennedy Road next to an official municipal rubbish dump?
13. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Head of the Town Planning Department had to live in a non-white suburb which he had helped design, like Fenix, and he had a motor accident on a narrow road – a road purposely made so narrow because poor areas are 'not supposed to carry much traffic'.
14. Wouldn't it be terrific if the Head of the Roads Department was forced to live in Fenix and his friends got lost trying to find the place. Fenix has not had a road sign indicating its location for more than twelve years.
15. Now if the Town Clerk was forced to live in Clear Suburb, and he found that his home was built on shale, now, wouldn't that be super?'

The conclusion just made me more angry. It said:

'Well, anyway, I believe that in their reincarnated lives they may find themselves in these places, if they do not end up somewhere else.'

The cowardly letter had no signature or address. Merely a cryptic ending in capital letters:

THE AIR THAT LIVES.

The sheer gall of the letter writer infuriated me. After all, we protect this land from Communism; you'd think they wouldn't be able to thank us enough. For the first time since his term of office had begun, I felt a twinge of sympathy for old Potty. This poor old Pot was really getting some disgusting filth directed his way. If I played my cards right with Andries Oosthuisen, maybe they'd let me have a few unrestricted shots at the cheeky swine, when they caught him.

City Hall was soon abuzz with talk about the poisonous letter. Slick Eddie in Administration felt it was a white boy just having some fun at our expense.

'What white boy could know so much about the non-white areas?' said I.

Eddie: 'Some of these liberal whites are really crazy. They benefit the most from our laws but they are the ones who speak out the most against them. But how can anybody ask the Mayor and his officials to live in non-white areas? That's breaking the law! I mean these democratically elected people come into power because of a set of laws and are part of the process that implements those laws; how can they then go and break those laws? It's irresponsible.'

I looked at Eddie with new respect and said: 'We contribute the majority of the city's rates. Why should we spend the rates on non-whites? There is a huge housing shortage because of the non-white birth-rate; a lot of white municipal officials living in non-white areas will only make the problem worse and probably upset the non-whites.'

Eddie laughed and said: 'But you know, Hennie, even though I am as much of a patriot as you are, lately I've caught myself grinning at the thought of old Potty in one of those tiny semi-detached houses; have you seen them? Mile on mile of little homes, painted all exactly the same colour, with no pavements, few civic amenities . . . Do you know some of those houses can only be entered through the kitchen, and the toilet is upstairs. And the stairs that have to be negotiated to get to some of those

houses are incredible. How the sick and old manage, especially at night, I'll never know.'

I looked closely at Eddie. I had always thought of him as a responsible citizen with traditional values. Here he was talking as if non-whites were the same as us.

I said: 'Yes, but if they were not being housed in subsidized homes, these damn darkies would be living in filthy slums. Small homes might just get the message through to them: that they shouldn't have such large families.'

Eddie looked at me and agreed: 'We have a tried and trusted system that's worked well all these years; changing it might cause chaos. Many of the non-white areas are new because the people have been moved out of the central parts of Tegwhite. So, of course facilities will take some time, and of course they cost a lot of money. If only God will give the non-white the wisdom to see all these things. It is in the non-whites' own interests that they behave themselves. I'd hate to be in that terrorist's shoes when Andries gets hold of him.'

Two days later I monitored a call from Oosthuisen: 'Mr Mayor, good news and bad news.'

Potz: 'Shoot.'

Oosthuisen: 'We've traced the computer that produced the "Wonderful Letter". It's from City Hall.'

Potz: 'I don't believe it! Every one of my staff is thoroughly vetted. Even the non-whites are . . .'

Oosthuisen: 'It's your biggest computer; and according to everything we've been able to deduce, it was produced at night. The night of the twenty-third May to be precise.'

Potz: 'But how can you be so certain?'

Oosthuisen: 'A special security mechanism built into all Tegwhite municipal computers, and into the paper used. Definitely City Hall computer paper. The time the letter was printed was recorded invisibly onto the paper. We've examined the guilty computer minutely but there are no clues as to how it happened.'

Potz: 'But, but, the place is sealed tight at night. Have you questioned the security staff?'

Oosthuisen: 'Rigorously. Nobody got in and nobody got out of your administration section on that night, or any other night for that matter. So I am afraid I will have to send over a Special Section to question your staff. It isn't going to be pleasant.'

Potz: 'When will they be coming?'
Oosthuisen: 'Sergeant Pistorius and his men will be there in fifteen minutes. They will be speaking to you first.'

Those security people are damned thorough! (And thank God for that.) But at the end of all the intensive interrogations we were still no nearer to finding the rascal.

Major Andries Oosthuisen and the Mayor addressed the administrative staff about the letter. We were warned to be extra careful and if we found anything suspicious happening, we had to report it immediately to Security.

'In the meantime, certain special security measures have been instituted to prevent a recurrence of this episode,' Andries growled. He was bloody angry. It was not often that a felon escaped his clutches.

It isn't pleasant being under suspicion. Once you are outside the law you lay yourself open to the attack of any thug in uniform. I was innocent, but for a few days there, I must confess I had an inkling of what it must mean to be non-white.

But a week after that everything went back to normal. Even the Mayor was in a good mood. He had been invited to Taiwan and was leaving in six weeks. Talk about the perks of the job! He was taking his wife along as well as some of the Heads of Departments and a few City Councillors.

It is not often that people are inconsiderate enough (and sufficiently lacking in etiquette) to burst in on the Mayor unannounced. But that Friday morning when I looked up from my desk to see Major Andries Oosthuisen towering above me, I certainly was not going to argue with him.

He smiled at me, but it reminded me of the smile of a steel automaton. He had a video tape in his huge paw. The Mayor asked the Major in immediately. The Major left half an hour later and I went in to get some papers signed by our First Citizen.

He looked a wreck; his eyes were glassy and the tightness had gone out of his skin. The lax flesh of his face moved chaotically in every direction. This would never do. Everybody knows that our enlightened city moves in one direction only: towards the Free West.

He was no longer in control.

Potz: 'That damned computer has gone and done it again! The thing was not plugged in! The keyboard worked all by itself and

the printer printed the "Wonderful" letter again last night. We got it all on video tape.' His voice had a wild crack in it and he seemed in a state of total panic. 'It printed that letter one hundred times but it was not connected to any other computer. Hennie, what's going on?'

This man needs a break, I thought. 'It's alright your worship,' I said, 'just some subversive Communist plot. We'll nail the terrorists to the cross. God is on our side.'

The Mayor looked wildly at me and, getting up in one jagged, undignified motion, dashed out of his office. He said something like 'AAAGGGHH!'

This would never do. I rang up Major Oosthuisen. It is a top secret fact that I am a sergeant in the SSP. My special brief is to keep tabs on the Mayor. That way we detect quickly if the fellow has unnoticed liberal tendencies or is unchristian or something. Some of the foreign types who see the Mayor are also rather dangerous people. But we keep our finger on the pulse of things.

Of course, the big joke was that I once reported faithfully on a Mayor who was in the SSP himself!

The Major told me what had happened: 'We put in hidden video cameras rigged to begin working when any computer equipment began operating; and sound detectors wired directly through to police and SSP headquarters. I don't know how it happened, Hennie, but that same computer worked all by itself independent of any obvious power source. The video cameras picked up the working of the computer and showed the letter being printed. There was definitely nobody actually operating that computer. The video camera stopped working once the computer stopped. And we didn't see the envelopes being printed. Our electronic sound detectors did pick up the rustle of paper, but not the sound of breathing or footsteps or doors opening and closing. In any case if any exit from that administration room had been used our detectors would have picked that up. The infra-red beams that cross the room at every angle were not broken; the security staff heard and saw nothing. Hennie, it's a complete mystery.'

'Could it have an internal power source pre-programmed to do this?' I asked.

Oosthuisen: 'I spoke to the local distribution agency and to the manufacturer's Head Office in Japan. There is no hidden internal power source. The computer cannot work by itself. But I've asked the local agency to take the computer apart anyway; under our supervision, of course. Sorry about this, but we've got no choice.'

'That's understandable,' I said.

'Oh, Hennie,' said the Major. 'I'm rather worried about the Mayor. He's become far too disturbed by all this. Try to help him. After all, it's only an anonymous letter. No city is without problems. And we must have more problems if most of our city's rate-payers are not allowed by law to elect City Councillors. Of course, that is in accordance with our constitution and our traditional way of life. Most of the non-whites are grateful for our wise leadership. They know they are inferior to white people. But do help him, Hennie.'

'The Mayor will pull through, Major,' said I. 'The old pioneering spirit will see to that.' But I was worried.

We watched the dismantling of the guilty computer that afternoon. It was only a year old, but the technicians told the office staff that it would afterwards be reassembled and sold. That computer was pulled apart till there was virtually nothing joined to anything. But at the end of it the technicians assured us that the computer could not be worked by remote control and definitely could not 'work by itself'.

But there had to be an explanation! Now, I've never trusted the Japanese; after all they are also non-whites; let's not try to get away from that. Okay, so today they are our chief suppliers of some things, but really, how can any normal civilized person expect those cunning oriental dwarfs to even think straight? I'm sure they rigged the computer in some fiendish way to work by itself.

I know that still doesn't explain how the letters got out of the administration room on two separate occasions, but I'm still thinking about that.

The Mayor pitched up at work the next day as if nothing had happened. I decided to forget the whole thing, and just hoped that our Christian Mayor would pull himself together eventually.

At about eleven that morning, I informed the Mayor that the editor of the *Daily Juice* was on the line. Preen, the new editor of the *Juice*, was on fairly good terms with the Mayor. We had all breathed a sigh of relief when the old fire-breathing radical editor had been transferred. He had too much of a conscience. And no control over his mind.

Potz: 'Ah, Preen! Put him on Hennie!'

I knew how Potz felt: a sane mind with the right values is often like an oasis in the desert. I listened in.

'Hello, Vernon!' said Potz happily.

Preen: 'Hello Arnold. Keeping well?'

Potz: 'Yes, thank you, Vernon; how's Joyce?'

Preen: 'First class, first class, Arnold, old sport. Arnold, I'm afraid I've received a rather nasty letter for the "Letters to the Editor" column. It's titled "Wouldn't it be Wonderful?"'

Potz: 'Give me the first line.'

Preen read out the first line of the 'Wonderful' letter and I heard old Potz swear. The fat was in the fire.

Potz: 'Can you keep it out of your paper?'

Preen: 'This kind of subversive twaddle isn't worth a drop of printer's ink, but if the independent newspapers get it, you'll have a few difficult questions coming your way.'

Potz: 'Will you send the letter to Major Oosthuisen?'

Preen: 'Sure thing. Give my love to Mary. Bye.'

The Voice, the local independent weekly, was the first to print the letter, and the next day virtually all the other independent newspapers followed suit.

The independent radio stations picked up the story and many reporters began badgering me to get an interview with our Mayor. Our state radio and TV acted as if the anonymous letter didn't exist. But *The Voice* mentioned the letter almost every week and ran a series of pictures showing the Mayor's home and his suburb, for instance, and a picture of some drab non-white suburb like Fenix. Pictures of the Stanmake Library's book stock and the Beria Library stock in a white suburb featured, as did the municipal rubbish dump in Bennedy Road in the non-white area of Clearstan. A home was shown right next to the rubbish dump. But of course the Mayor granted no interviews with the subversive media.

It was scandalous. A deliberate slant was being put on things that was not in our city's interests at all. The Administrator of our province called in the Mayor to the capital, and the Minister of Internal Affairs took to phoning the Mayor almost every other day.

Human Radio, the radio station that boasted that it was pro human beings, conducted very damaging interviews with subversive people in the townships who expressed their gratitude to 'The air that lives' and amplified all that the letter had said.

The interviewer concluded by saying that the Tegwhite Council

was spending millions annually on the beach-front but spent too little on where most of those who worked at the beach-front lived.

'It must be remembered,' said the interviewer, 'that overseas TV cameras always show the non-white townships as an integral part of Tegwhite.'

The invitation from Taiwan was withdrawn, and I watched a good man, a jovial, genial man dissolve in front of my eyes. The Mayor, I believe, was an honest man merely trying to do his job as best he could. But he began to disintegrate.

The letter had got to many major newspapers all over the world and they began asking to speak to the Mayor almost every day. Overseas TV networks began showing the worst parts of Tegwhite's non-white areas. All kinds of subversive types tried to sneak into Tegwhite to delve into just what kind of city Tegwhite is. We have the best security apparatus in the world, but some of the scoundrels managed to get through.

And what they wrote was scandalous. I mean Tegwhite is not Bloektien or Freehide. We've desegregated some of the beaches, we've even allowed the darkies into the parks; they actually sit in most of the restaurants and dance at the hotels, without getting Departmental permission first, as used to be the case. They've even finally been allowed onto our buses!

They aren't allowed in our hospitals except as doctors, but then they have their own hospitals provided for them.

We have forward-thinking Councillors; that's what the *Daily Juice* says. They're very concerned about our city's overseas image; and our country's image. And as a port city we are very aware that we must sometimes permit the undisciplined overseas rabble liberties and the kind of respect that we'd never permit the local non-whites.

But luckily, most of the local non-whites know their place and you'll hardly ever find them in our cinemas or night-clubs (even though they were recently opened to all races after diabolically sustained overseas pressure), because they know they're only really welcome in these places as ushers or wine stewards.

That subversive paper, *The Times,* said that the central part of Tegwhite was reserved for white residence, so non-whites generally had further to travel to work, because, of course, we had organized it so that most of the land set aside for commercial and industrial purposes was in our areas.

Non-white land is generally more expensive than white land so non-whites paid higher municipal rates but had little in the way of facilities.

We made sure that this overseas newspaper was not available in our libraries, but the damage was done. More trouble for our beautiful, misunderstood land. Tegwhite was fast acquiring the reputation of some kind of horrendous combination of a Nazi Berlin and a Fascist Rome.

Overseas professional and sporting bodies refused to come to Tegwhite and it became internationally known as a City of Shame that abused, exploited and humiliated its poorest and most handicapped citizens.

All of us were furious; couldn't people see that there were vast differences of culture between the races and that our present system was the best? Surely they understood that we couldn't have such a huge, modern city like Tegwhite controlled by a lot of stone-age darkies who could barely put two sentences together properly. What would they do if they lived here, these foreigners? Would they sell themselves down a polluted river?

Some of the Councillors hit on the bright idea of getting leading non-white Tegwhite people to speak out on just how much Tegwhite had progressed in the last ten years, and how things could not happen overnight and how peaceful the city was.

That was when we learnt just how disloyal some of these dark people are. We tried to impress on them that a good image for Tegwhite will mean more visitors and capital attracted to our city and more money all round for everybody.

But most of them wouldn't have anything to do with it. Some of them actually appeared to be gloating over our predicament. Even the puppet bodies which were in our pay said they 'didn't want to go against God'.

Would you believe such nonsense? I mean our city is not Belfast.

I believe very firmly that high-ranking public officials in our land must be made of very firm material. ISCOR steel. They must have very strong, upright Christian principles. They must believe in us, the great white people of this land, who after all, introduced our technology into this hidden part of the world, cared for and fed the

blacks, and dragged them into the twentieth century.

And our democratically elected public officials must know how public funds are to be spent.

The Mayor had developed a nervous twitch over his mouth, but that last morning when he came in, the twitch was lost in a large smile.

'The air's lovely this morning, eh, Hennie,' said the Mayor, as he breezed past me to his office.

Many of the non-whites had been complaining about the quality of the air that they were forced to breathe; several non-white suburbs were situated next to oil refineries, factories or the airport. Thinking that the Mayor was being sarcastic, I grinned and followed him into his Parlour, with his correspondence.

Tegwhite citizens had been deluging the Mayor, Councillors and officials with hundreds of letters a day complaining about everything under the sun. Most of the letters were from non-whites.

I always threw away all those that were badly written or whose return addresses were not clear, but there was still a mountain of work to do in answering the complaints.

We had taken on two new typists. Both non-whites. But we were not coping.

I almost broke a blood vessel. Up on the wall was a picture of Bishop Tutu! And Mahatma Gandhi! I couldn't believe it. What the hell was going on? The Mayor was quite cheery and I had to take dictation straight away.

He began dictating letters to all the City Councillors and Tegwhite Corporation Heads 'suggesting' that they move to non-white suburbs for a month or two. He peered at me through his glasses and said: 'It'll make the non-whites feel that we are concerned about them, eh, Hennie? It might prevent a few of them from becoming terrorists too.'

I said nothing.

The letters were hand-delivered, and I spent the rest of the day fending off irate public servants who wanted to know whether their Mayor had finally lost his marbles. The Mayor, meanwhile, had left soon after signing the letters saying that he would not be in the next day as he was 'moving'.

I received a telephone call from the Corporation Security Division the next morning; from my old friend, Sergeant Smith, to be precise.

Sergeant Smith: 'Yay, Hennie, you wouldn't believe who we were asked to pick up this morning!'

'Bishop Tutu?' said I, not feeling very much like kidding around.

Smith: 'The Mayor! My section put him into Tegwhite General Hospital's psychiatric section this morning for observation.'

'But, but you can't do that!' I said, feeling terribly appalled.

'No, man! It's all official. A doctor at the hospital examined the old man and said he must be taken in for observation. Then another senior doctor came in and confirmed what the younger doctor said.'

'But what did the Mayor do?' said I.

'We got a phone call at seven this morning from one of our informers in Fenix. He said that the Mayor was trying to move into an empty house in Fenix. Can you believe that, Hennie?'

'Oh, no!' I said. 'What happened?'

'When we got there, there was a big crowd of non-whites standing around and a large truck from which furniture was being taken into the house. The non-whites were quite cheerful and seemed very proud that "the Mayor was going to live in their street." The Mayor came out of the house and demanded to know what we were doing there. He said that he didn't need protection. Before we could say anything, he said that his taking possession of the house was quite legal; the rent had been paid, the electricity deposit had been furnished and would we please leave him alone'.

'Were the Mayor's family there?' I asked.

Smith: 'No, thank goodness. But I informed the Mayor of the municipal ordinances and government laws he was breaking by moving into a non-white suburb. I asked him for his permit, but he didn't have one. I then asked him to come with us, but he refused. He said he was merely obeying God's injunction to share the woes of the people, and that man's law is always superseded by God's law!'

'He said all this in front of the non-whites?' I said.

'Yes, Hennie; it was terrible. I always thought old Potz was a bit dilly, but this was a fiasco.'

'And what a thing to happen to the dignity of the Mayoral Office,' said I. 'How are we going to get the darkies to be in awe of us, now, if the Mayor himself breaks the law?'

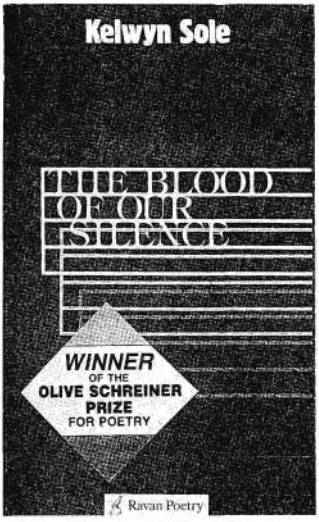
'Some Mayor,' said Smith with a hoarse laugh. 'Anyway, I rang Major Oosthuisen who said he'd send some of his men and a doctor to help bring in Potty, but that on no account were we to leave the old fool in Fenix. The old man tried to barricade himself

in a room of the house, but we broke down the door and the doctor managed to give him an injection which knocked him out.'

Thankfully, we have a new Mayor now; one who has been thoroughly vetted by all the security sections including our psychiatric services. We never found out who wrote that letter. But it doesn't matter now. Everything is virtually back to normal. The air is certainly very fresh and clean. As it should be in a civilized, free, Western country which adheres to Christian values and the Free Enterprise system.

Old Potty is in an Asylum; his family have just about abandoned him. When I want an afternoon's diversion, I visit him sometimes (I consider it my Christian duty). He's as potty as ever. He tends to glare balefully at me. And mutter darkly about an insane country which perpetually persecutes its normal citizens.

Thank God for Asylums.



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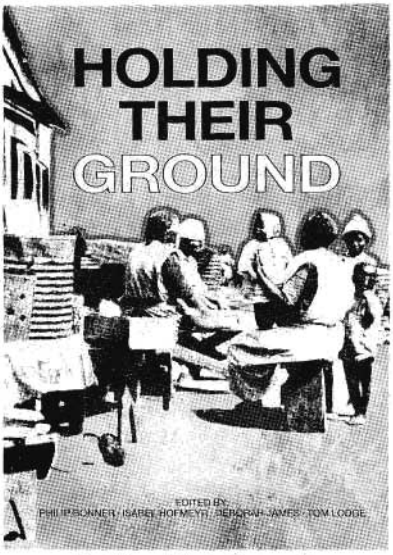

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Class, locality and culture in 19th and 20th century South Africa.
History Workshop No. 4
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332pp *Ravan Press and Wits University Press* **(R34-95)**

WHO WRITES? WHO READS? THE CONCEPT OF A PEOPLE'S LITERATURE

Nadine Gordimer

People's Literature as a particular mode appropriate to the present is something most developed countries have no call for. Their contemporary literature is confidently middle-class – which is to say it may assume an educated reader with whom the writer shares terms of reference. The demand for a People's Literature seems to have been answered once and for all, and the need apparently satisfied, by the comic book, with the people's hero as an extra-terrestrial, and by oral folk poets – the wise-cracking commentators, disc jockeys and presenters of television and radio. Thus the semi-literate and illiterate appear to be uncomplainingly provided for.

But in developing countries the situation is different. The Irish poet, Seamus Heaney's, 'government of the tongue' does not have the same constituency.[1] In the post-colonial world in general, and in South Africa specifically, the illiterate and semi-literate now surround the cultural convention.

They have been called up by history.

They have been called up by justice. For over three hundred years, not only were they excluded from any role in defining cultural norms; it was denied that they had any need of these let alone anything to contribute. If they could read, there were virtually no common references, no givens, between them and white writers, and few between them and black writers, the latter already upwardly alienated by education and the white-collar style of life it has implied. Now, beyond the opportunities to acquire knowledge of modern science, technology and administration, there is asserted the masses' right to enjoy the self-realization of literature. Here, where the responsibility of educationists is seen as exceeded, it is the writers themselves who are expected to take over.

The demand is for a particular fictional mode: subjects, narrative form, vocabulary, to express ethics, mores and relationships that arise from the daily lives of peasants and industrial labourers where there has never been a written mode stemming from their own level of consciousness. It means finding a format and distribution process that will bring books arising directly out of that consciousness into the ghettos and squatter camps where there are no libraries, and into the farm huts where there is no money to buy books in the form of consumer luxuries.

It is formulated as a call for a People's Literature.

How does People's Literature differ from plain old Social Realism?

There is a basic distinction of the greatest consequence.

Any writer may become a social realist by choosing a worker as his/her protagonist or hero. It is subject and treatment of subject which defines social realism, not the class of the writer.

But in South Africa, People's Literature is conceived as that written *by,* not about, the people. Thus it seems the responsibility for creating it is not even that of any progressive literary establishment.

Who are 'the people'?

Virtually all blacks and so-called coloureds, who comprise the overwhelming majority of our population, qualify under the blunt definition of workers as those who, if they don't get up in the morning and go to work, won't eat: they don't have unearned income. But the image of 'the people' has come to be symbolized more specifically in the features of farm workers, miners and construction workers: the rural people and the labour power they export under the migratory labour system to single-sex hostels in the industrial areas.

The image is appropriate. These workers stand, historically, at either end of that system established by the conflation of capitalism and racism; in between is the whole span of black labour yoked by the white man – factory workers, street cleaners, domestic servants. The agricultural workers on white farms are the lowest paid, having (like the domestic workers) no statutory minimum wage; the miners and industrial workers are the freest on the way to economic emancipation, having organized themselves in powerful trade unions which will one day end the migratory labour system that brought them from country to town without the right to be accompanied by their families.

A People's Literature therefore means – to paraphrase Walter Benjamin – literature conceived as the people's 'ability to relate' their own lives.[2]

But Benjamin was speaking of the storyteller among the people – a title which in itself sets the relater aside as someone who has emerged from those with whom he shares the conditions of living. The object of People's Literature, in the context of which I am speaking, is to do away with attendant connotations of a particular gift or talent others do not have.

A year or two ago a South African literary journal featured 'Worker Poets' as a special category of poet, as one might speak of the lyricist or symbolist. The poems were written, in their spare time, by people who labour with their hands. But the validation of their status *as poets* was that they were *workers.* The syllogism follows: writing poetry is not work; any worker can write poetry; therefore poets are not workers.

The 'worker' poet or playmaker or prose fiction writer does not wish to emancipate him/herself from the condition of worker; not at all. He/she is asserting not a desire to opt out of the labouring class, but the right, as a worker, to the making of poetry, of literature – the right to transcendence not as a quality that will exalt the worker above the dirt of toil, but which is integral to it. He or she is asserting the right to the ecstasy of creation while doing piece-work eight hours a day.

This has been a deep subconscious desire, beyond material justice, in most workers' movements; it is present in the determination of the liberation move-

ments to establish a workers' democracy in South Africa.

The 'worker poets' are the balladeers of strikes, wage disputes, the perils of industrial accidents, the violence experienced in clashes with the police sent in by the bosses or the State to break strikes. The balladeer is himself one of the striking workers; he is himself miles underground with his fellow miners when the rock fall occurs. It is the experience that makes him a poet, it is the rhetoric of union meetings and the liberation movements' manifestos that gives him the Word.

To those who look for an intensely transformed experience in reading poetry, not *experience as poetry,* generalized doggerel put together mainly out of slogans stirs little response. But People's Literature, it can be argued, is not for the reader who is looking for experience intensified by the writer; it is for those whose own experience *exceeds the intensity of words.* Therefore the most banal of verbal signals will set off identification. People's Literature is not meant so much to enlarge the reader's understanding beyond his familiar world, as to concentrate his understanding of the worth and dignity of that world, give it its rightful place in the national consciousness as the class-alienated storyteller is believed not to be able to do.

How is this to be achieved?

Several years ago the cover of a number of 'Cultural Worker', a journal of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, quoted the Angolan writer, Jorge Rebello: '. . . forge simple words/that even children can understand/words which will enter every house/like the wind'.

Nothing is more difficult. Some with the vocabulary of genius at their command have spent a lifetime striving for the words that will enter every house. (Pablo Neruda was one of them.)

In the context of a People's Literature it is a glorious demand, based on faith in the untapped creative resources of the masses; or it is a total misunderstanding of the *labour* that writing is, to believe this achievement could come from the spare-time occupation of *anybody* who has the appropriate life experience. Handling the unfamiliar tool of the written word, what the 'worker poet' fashions is likely to be what Njabulo Ndebele has termed the 'interaction of the surface symbols of South African reality'[3] – no more. One of the functions of workshops run by the Congress of South African Writers and other groups of writers is to help people break free of this 'surface interaction' and release forceful originality in expression of their own life experience, both personal and in their organizations. This aim also implies the need for acceptance of a critique that, while qualified to understand the cultural demands of the struggle, nevertheless posits that having the required revolutionary convictions is not enough in the other form of struggle – that for poetic expression. A critique by Themba Mhambi, in a recent number of *The New Nation,* was not afraid to apply these standards to a COSAW publication, a collection

of poetry entitled *17 July 1988.*

So far, I believe, drama is the literary form which best shows positive signs of realizing the concept of a People's Literature. Some reasons may be identified. The worker-actor-playmakers are in total, immediate interaction with the roles they play in real life. There is unity of experience in the actuality of dramatized events 'set' on the factory floor, for the workers' plots are collective autobiography – the clashes between themselves and the bosses, the relation between the workers' own differing personalities and states of awareness. Any inadequacy of dialogue is overcome by song and mime. Humour and the *physical* individuality of performance break the bonds of rhetoric in which the 'worker poets' often bind themselves.

In *The Long March*, a play that has been widely presented and is very popular, Mrs Thatcher, represented by a worker wearing a huge, toothy, papier-mâché blonde head, takes a coffee break with the bosses as a metaphor for collusion between British capitalism and South African industry. The mode so happily hit upon is something between Grand Guignol and Brecht – an observation I make using references that might mean nothing to the players, and of which, indeed, they prove they have no need, having of themselves arrived at a successful means of relating their own lives among their own people. In the more formal theatre, workshop plays deal boldly with aspects of the struggle and rewrite or re-examine unwritten and suppressed history: for example the play *Bambata's Children.*

For the professional writer the ultimate problem in the creation of a People's Literature is not so much, in the case of the black writer, that s/he has been removed from the common lot (even if s/he still lives in the ghetto). It is not so much, in the case of the white writer, that no matter how involved s/he may be in the cause of black liberation, he or she has never shared the general experience of living on the dark side of apartheid racism.

The problem is that generations of the most appalling cultural deprivation inevitably have produced in the masses a deep resentment of the 'republic of letters'. In South Africa this 'republic', like all other pretensions to democracy, has been a mockery of the name. It has discounted the masses entirely, whether as creators or consumers of literature. Blacks have felt that the only way to belong, in literature, except as other people's material, was to cease to be one of the people. And that, in the revolutionary era of the 80s and 90s is to cease to be yourself: your black self taking your own liberation and life in your own hands.

The desperate determination to claim the worth of that life in the lasting form of art is in conflict with any acceptance that the writer does what the worker cannot do – that the practice of writing is a craft, a trade in itself. Why be surprised? The resentment engendered by this conflict has led other revolutions to send their writers to cut cane. In capitalist societies it has jealously

led to sending writers to perform in chat shows – *anything* rather than have the masses recognize that the writer labours at a vocation whose condition is not open to the public, even if anyone may become President . . .

But the concept of a People's Literature not only assumes everyone can write. It also assumes everyone reads or will read. Alas, we know this has not proved to be the case in most countries where the majority has become literate and books are available in all communities, through libraries. Certainly not in the Western world. Comic-book literacy is not book-literacy.

With desk-top publishing and modest new forms of distribution through trade union and community organizations in South Africa's black ghettos, journals and books are beginning, in a very small way, to be part of the furnishing of places where people gather, and as such may begin to be used as essentials. Cassettes recording oral poets seem set to become inexpensive best-sellers as part of cultural liberation from conventional means as well as norms.

It is early to judge, perhaps, but I believe it significant that Ravan Press found a surprising demand for an expensive scholarly work, far removed from the rhetoric of political pamphlets as from any assumed naïvety. This was Tom Lodge's *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945.*[4] Skotaville Publishers had a similar experience with Mokgethi Motlhabi's *Black Resistance to Apartheid.*[5]

Of course, these last are not works of the imagination; but the effort of comprehension may stir something that leads to tackling works of the imagination. For, in Benjamin's beautiful aphorism, literature's great offering is its 'creation of a demand which could be satisfied only later'.[6] And that is surely a perfect definition and defence of literature's *revolutionary* function. Literature calls up the effort to formulate and analyse vague yearnings, to resolve frustration and resentment through grasping their causes and acting upon them at a level of roused *being* the learning-by-maxim of political education cannot always reach. Here stands the writer's real justification for his existence in the revolutionary situation, and the claim for the practice of literature as a category of work demanding special aptitude and skills.

It has to be accepted that talent is not a right – alas, no.

But every means of giving talent a chance to discover itself, to grow within political, economic and social structures conducive to this, *is* a right. None of these structures has ever existed for the black masses in South Africa, in a succession of racist regimes. Writing talent has been stifled, wasted, distorted by exile within the country as well as without. But this talent will not be freed to create a People's Literature, in the true sense that literature shall embody the consciousness of the masses instead of that only of an elite, if writing is regarded as a kind of therapy for industrial alienation.

By law and lack of education, by lack of libraries – which are the writer's continuing education – by lack of a corner to themselves with a table to write

at, the potential writers among the people have been cast as miners, street cleaners, ditch diggers. For the future, if there is to be a People's Literature it will come about because these writers will now do, instead, the work they are gifted and fitted for. If there is to be a people's literature it will be a literature in the languages spoken by the people, the majority, and not – as literature has been, including that written by blacks themselves – confined principally to English and the cultural colonization this implies. If there is to be a People's Literature it will come about only if there is no State interference in a future South Africa, and if social conditions ensure that comic-book literacy, disseminated through the long-established colonial agencies which continue to monopolize distribution of publications in the entire African subcontinent, does not become the people's literary culture, as it has in so many parts of the world.

Only then could the contradictions of a People's Literature begin to be resolved. Only then, when asked, 'Who writes?', those of us who work to create a post-colonial, post-apartheid culture under majority rule in South Africa might be able to answer: all who have the ability. And when asked 'Who reads?', might be able to answer: the people.

Notes:

1. Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue.* Faber & Faber, 1988.
2. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Production'. Trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana/Collins, 1979.
3. Njabulo Ndebele, 'Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction'. *Staffrider* Vol. 6 No. 1, 1984.
4. Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945.* Ravan Press, 1983.
5. Mokgethi Motlhabi, *Black Resistance to Apartheid.* Skotaville Publishers, 1984.
6. Walter Benjamin, Ibid.

*This paper was presented at a symposium of the UNESCO Working Group in Senegal, 1989.

RICHARD RIVE: A MEMOIR

Stephen Gray

One of the anecdotes Richard Rive liked to repeat, dating from the 1950s when that old racist battle-axe, as she said, 'represented bulk' in South African English letters and was still a threat to her rebellious juniors, is the following. Sarah Gertrude Millin, after all, wrote an entire sub-literature on behalf of South Africa's people of colour, chronicling their 'miscegenated' origins and prophesying they would never fit into the white master-race, as exemplified by herself and General Smuts, or among the pure black underdogs packed for ever in servants' quarters and slums. In her scheme of the great South African family's bonding, she relegated 'coloureds' to a step-relationship; *God's Step-children* was the title of her eugenicist historical novel – and worldwide best-seller, be it said – on that subject.

So up stepped Richard Rive in his brilliant twenties, with a sheaf of short stories about 'his people', which were winning the *Drum* story competition and the *Cape Argus'*, and thanks to the much heralded rebirth of black writing in South Africa of which he was a prominent part, were being translated and republished as rapidly as he could produce them. When the colour-bar dowager encountered this upstart, evidently she was struck with genealogical confusion. All she could blurt was: 'What are you – *Indian?'* To which Richard suavely replied: 'No ma'am, I am your step-child.'

This story may have been Richard's invention. But the thought of Richard confronting one of that dangerous generation of apologists for racial discrimination with his perky existence – his glossy black limbs and possibly St Helenan kinky hair, jelled down, athletically sporting a University of Cape Town cravat – freshens one's sense that literary history is a sequence of such mythical moments.

Richard saw himself as, and often enough said he was a cultural missionary, bringing civilization to the whites of South Africa. The legacy of the British novel in Africa he wrote off as the 'scenic special', dealing with 'flora, fauna and blacks in that order' from under a solatopi or through the window of a Cape to Cairo express. In the more liberal novel up to Alan Paton he heard all too clearly the tones of 'special pleading' and the message that blacks like him were to expect no more than handouts with passive recipiency.

Paton and he did meet, in Durban in 1962. Richard was there to ask the legend in his lifetime for an endorsement and, I suppose, blessing for *Quartet*, the anthology of short stories Richard had compiled from the new school and was taking to London:

This was an important meeting for me as we represented different direc-

> tions. He represented the high point of Liberal Writing in South Africa. I was representative of the nascent Protest School. Liberal writing may be loosely defined as writing mostly by Whites about Blacks to move Whites out of their socio-political complacency. It ranges from Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* to Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country.* Protest writing on the other hand is writing mostly by Blacks articulating their position to a White readership they feel can effect change. Sol Plaatje and Peter Abrahams were among its progenitors, forcing South African writing into a new, protest, direction.

Stickily, Paton lent his patronage to this youngster outpacing him in his demands for a changed dispensation.

But most of Richard's cultural missionizing was devoted to a further direction in the development of South African teaching – the re-education of Black people in terms of their own literature, rapidly ceasing to exist under the Bantu Education Act. Thus, a life of detoxicating the way white texts of the past were to be read, dealing with their submerged loads of bigotry and spelling out the grounds for a democratic, non-colour future. He was not to see this future achieved before his recent, horrific death. Thus also, a life lived interstitially in the loopholes of apartheid, holding a place for himself that was getting smaller – ducking frequently, emerging only when he knew he could strike a telling, solitary literary blow.

In a no-choice situation he had made the hardest choice of all. While virtually every other black writer of the 60s in Verwoerd's South Africa went voluntarily or was forced into exile, Richard remained at home. For this he has been held endlessly suspect – collaborator? quisling? But for at least fifteen years he was to have his published work banned; as he said, 'I was now part of a small elite of South African writers not allowed to read their own works in case they became influenced by them.' When I first met Richard, he was immobilised, depressed, going through the motions of a literary career without writing at all, unable legally to reach an audience – except occasionally for a small and loyal one overseas, notably through that lifesaver, the BBC Africa Service.

Richard Rive was born of 'mixed parentage' in 1931, and never knew his father. In his autobiography, *Writing Black,* published when he was fifty, he said he was genuinely unsure about his ancestry.

> I remember a mounted print which had pride of place on our dining-room wall; it showed a man I later learnt was my maternal grandfather. He sported a cheesecutter and a droopy Dr Crippen moustache and stood next to a racehorse he owned which had won the Metropolitan Handicap. He was unmistakably White. Blacks did not at that time own horses that

> won races. I must therefore conclude that my maternal grandmother must have been Black or Brown, as my mother was beautifully bronze.

With his mother and siblings Richard grew up in a decayed Edwardian apartment in District Six, the slum known to white Capetonians somewhat romantically as the Tavern of the Seven Seas. Now much celebrated retrospectively for its melting-pot culture – besides Richard it bred Alex la Guma and James Matthews in the writing world – District Six, like Sophiatown in Johannesburg, was condemned for clearance, its inhabitants dispersed to white-supervised and remote township ghettos, so that a longstanding and pell-mell tradition of freehold rights and urban-minded independence was dismantled and demolished by government decree.

'Mrs Rive's boy' climbed out of District Six faster. The family, he recorded, was always destined to upward social mobility anyway: 'Our hankering after respectability became obsessive. We always felt we were intended for better things.' At twelve he made the switch from Afrikaans to English in his reading and found his potential self in black Americans – the influence of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes remained his mainstay. During World War II a municipal scholarship got him to High School, where Latin and English paved the way to a life of teaching them in turn. 'I endured a harrowing childhood in District Six, where drunkenness, debauchery and police raids were the order of the day,' he noted, adding: 'No White authority had ever bothered to ask me whether they could take my past away. They simply brought in their bulldozers.'

The way out also opened through athletics – long-legged, gangly Richard the sprinter won a scholarship to the University of Cape Town on this account. He then trained at Hewat College, and that was his early career: teacher of Latin and English in the still-colonial syllabuses of the Cape Coloured schools and athletic coach to other aspirants.

By the time his first stories came out in book form – as *African Songs* in 1963, from Seven Seas Books in Berlin W 8, which turned out to be in East Berlin – the tug of the Cold War was underway for Richard's soul. His first grant, from the Farfield Foundation (subsequently discovered to have been a cover for the CIA), took him through Africa and to the meccas of Paris and London, where he found more African writers than on 'the continent'. In London the manuscript of his first novel was at Faber and Faber. Called *Emergency,* it recounted the Sharpeville massacre days of 1960 and the declaration of the first state of emergency as felt by a stream-of-consciousness alter ego for himself. Summoned to an editorial discussion, Richard waited . . . for T.S. Eliot to appear with the bulky tome and recommend changes. Richard never discussed this encounter, nor divulged the extent of the rewriting, but when *Emergency* came out it enjoyed considerable esteem as a report from the front-

line. Only in 1988 did the work first appear in South Africa under the marginally more lenient censorship system and by then Richard was completing its sequel, nicknamed *Emergency II* – this time a report from the same frontline of the second state of emergency, the same characters twenty-five years on. Faber, who published all of Abrahams and Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and *The African Image,* now also put out other emerging South Africans like C.J. Driver, finding exile in Britain.

The other rising London stable for South Africans was Heinemann with the African Writers Series. For this Richard compiled No. 9 with the business-like title, *Modern African Prose,* the first anthology to assemble a continent-wide English selection including Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Cyprian Ekwensi, Amos Tutuola and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In parts of independent Africa this title became the educational setwork to insert after *Julius Caesar* and the 'Immortality Ode'. Richard later refused to update and revise it, for it did have its historic position in the rise of African Literature and is still used as is today. *Modern African Prose* caught all the optimism of those heady Pan-African days – black was indeed beautiful, the African Personality as human and humane as any other; more humane, considering the centuries of exploitation by slavery and imperialism . . . Heady and optimistic, assertively forward-looking, as were Richard's own stories – impressionistic slivers of the poor life, singing of dignity and scenting freedom.

It would be too glib to say the despair, darkness and disillusion that set in on Richard from the mid-60s was merely a South African variant of an Africa-wide post-colonial phenomenon. Besides, Richard was cut off from that. Nor was the downward curve of his career entirely due to the deep freeze of high apartheid, which stalled not only his own, but all black aspirations; in fact, illegalized them. But certainly when we first met in his flat in 1969 he was living like a hermit, surrounded by African works that few others knew, the struggle dating as he stared at the spines. Gagged, his books banned, proscribed, he was also washed-up. The crime against humanity in this case is as follows: Richard was an achiever; as a writer he was disallowed achievement. The fire of the brilliant young talent (warmly overpraised, uncritically adored) was utterly doused.

But this was also *Rishard* of *Saloo* Court, surely. The flat mispronunciation of his name stuck as an affectionate joke and the block was named after the great white hunter, F.C. Selous, no less. There for the middle years of his existence Richard crouched, for Selous Court was in a 'white' area, off Rosmead Avenue, near the race track in Claremont. He did live in daily dread of a Group Areas Act bureaucrat knocking on the door. When the knock came, after all of twenty years, it did provoke a most restrained short story, 'The Man from the Board', his only one in years, and then about the suaveness of his eviction on the grounds of the colour of his skin. On principle he defied

discriminatory laws, and on principle he suffered.

This matter of principle remained as intact as it could. Richard relished tea-parties for fellow writers, and once over a bowl of cup-cakes sprinkled with hundreds-and-thousands I'd brought to cheer us the phone interrupted. Slowly Richard's plummy tones shifted from efficient reason to heated outrage. I gathered he was negotiating a pair of sport scholarships to a select white school in the Peninsula, only just preparing to take 'coloureds' at a pinch. The one boy I'd seen – gorgeously self-assured, with green, far-seeing eyes.

'No man, they don't have courage. They take both or neither,' he said in hurt.

From me: 'Why not compromise?'

'Not on your life,' said Richard. 'They must also take the one as black as pitch and a nose all over his face; besides, he's even better at pole-vaulting.'

Between trips overseas Richard rose to the top of where he could go: head of English at his old teacher training college. Once I was due to take his in-service students through an anthology of South African texts I had compiled precisely to make the educational advance locally that *Modern African Prose* had effected elsewhere a decade before. Thanks to Richard's influence, 'coloured' schools were setting it as it was the only reader to include work by a 'non-white' South African (to whit, one of Richard's own stories – banned!). Such was the courage of educational publishers then that Richard was the *only* Black South African writer in a heavily traditional sequence from David Livingstone through Trollope and Haggard to Kipling and Plomer. Heady, apartheid-breaking stuff in those days.

But the revolt of the black children against inferior syllabuses had overtaken us, rippling from Soweto in June, 1976, to Cape Town's Langa and Guguletu by August – and Crawford, where Hewat College was situated. Richard sweatingly drove through smashed barricades, all the Beirut and barbed-wire landscape of the media pictures, soon suppressed. We gathered in a decrepit classroom, stinking of burnt tyres and teargas, stones among broken glass between the desks. This session was now held in defiance of both police and boycotters; no electricity, none of the normal protection; a desolate, hopeless fear. We all appeared buckled, keeping out of view. My pressing question was why had these responsible adults risked coming. (Why, for that matter, had Richard and I.) During an intense workshop, during which some solemn and purposeful discussion was generated, as if in our corporate mind we could live separate from violence, ruin and squalor for a while, I managed to pose the question to Vic Wessels, banned for many years, whom I knew: they had all come because *Rishard* said they would *fail their exams* otherwise. Richard repeatedly refused comfortable job-offers at the then mostly-segregated University of Cape Town, feeling its Department of English had as yet hardly acknowledged the existence of South African authors. But I now saw he had made a virtue of having been forced to work for 'his people'.

Outside countries sponsored his own further academic career: a Masters in Afro-American Literature at Columbia and a Ph.D. at Magdalen, Oxford. There his thesis was on the life and work of Olive Schreiner. Surely this is how Richard sustained himself, forming the closest professional attachment to the Cape's own liberal feminist, annotating and explicating her lost manuscripts, researching out the shape of a career then only half-admired and half-suspected. During his leaves, Richard would doggedly walk up the hill to the Jagger Library of UCT and decode her difficult handwriting. His rate was a letter a day – and in many public collections he copied several thousands of them. The first of two volumes of her *Letters*, edited by him, came out from David Philip in Cape Town and from OUP in 1987. And by that year he was able to add to his curriculum vitae: Visiting Professor, Harvard.

As the touchstone of local affairs, Richard was always visited by other writers – in fact, he collected them – or went out of his way to attend conferences and gatherings where he would meet those like himself. Too many of his early literary acquaintances died tragically (Ingrid Jonker and Nat Nakasa in 1965, Arthur Nortje in 1970), so it fell to Richard to keep alive their reputations, stressing the wastage of their aborted talents – aborted by malevolent South Africa. Not quite so expectedly he also mourned other kinds of 'death' – the slow drying up of his friends driven into exile, their twilight in the diaspora. So for many overseas he was a go-between, bringing the gritty news of his endurance. Back home he was the been-to, reminding others that at no matter what cost literary voices had to be kept audible, remembered.

By the mid-70s a new, combative and many-headed generation had arisen, and Richard was a rather token elder to them. He came up to Johannesburg for a conference organized by *New Classic*, Sipho Sepamla's literary journal called up from the ashes of Nakasa's *Classic* of the 60s. There he delivered the points summarized in the opening paragraphs here.

I organized that he should meet Christopher van Wyk and Fhazel Johennesse, if only on the drive in from the airport. Days later they were inseparable and had formed another journal, *Wietie*, No. 2 of which carried a lengthy interview with Richard. There he dispensed suitable writerly advice, warning them most strongly of all not to crimp their imaginations to fit any Black Consciousness or other ideology. One of their mammoth talk sessions in my house led to more than intellectual hunger, and I am no cook. Leaving the two younger ones to recover from their rigorous debate, I drove robust, over-weight Richard out for some take-aways. Absent-mindedly I kept the car going while Richard, in blazer and tie, hopped in to order. Perhaps a further thought of mine was that Richard might offer to pay. Although quite affluent by then and a noteworthy gormandizer, he was also a complete master at cadging free meals.

Whether it was a genuine case of racial discrimination and the joint was

really 'Reserved for Whites Only' or Richard's meanness that caused the uproar I'll never know, but within minutes the Portuguese cafe-owner and Richard were abusing one another in many languages on the pavement. If he had had his mortar-board and doctoral scroll with him, I'm sure he would have waved them around too. Once the carving knife came out, Richard retreated to the car, slamming the door. His fury slowly subsided. I suggested I should buy the goods – what did he want? But Richard insisted I should show solidarity in his boycott of such a house of insult, even if I was prepared to pay – a point of principle which must have really pinched. I pointed out that local types of all grades of pigmentation were coming out of the place with soggy Sunday lunches wrapped in newspaper right before our eyes . . . Richard said he'd settle for dried Marie biscuits back home. Soon Christopher and Fhazel had tucked their rand notes in their socks and were off, back to Riverlea township.

Friends may have sustained Richard with banquetting, but he gave back the inroads he made in good companionship, in unstoppable raconteuring. At the home of David and Marie Philip, our publishers, once when they were extending their cottage with an 'Alan Paton' wing, they invited us to dine with them in honour of their bestselling author. When we realized the dour old Anglican was actually due to put in an appearance, we both became morose with apprehension. Richard's impulse was to devour all the food before he appeared. . . and the sheer momentum of our terror had us wolfing down everything. Only by 11.30 p.m., after an epic gorge, dead soldiers afoot, could we admit to our exhausted host and hostess the reason for our relief: the doyen himself had not pitched up.

Trips to Onrust an hour or so east of Cape Town were ritual. These were to take week-end provisions to Richard's oldest literary friends, Jack Cope, Uys Krige, Jan Rabie and his wife Marjorie Wallace, who loosely satellited around the country's oldest literary journal, *Contrast,* which Jack steered nobly. Engineering the passes of the Hottentots Holland mountains, the back seat wobbling with raw livers in plastic bags and yards of spiced sausage, is a recurring memory. Then dips off a wild stretch of coast where 'mixed' parties could enjoy their own social formations unobserved, plus mouthfuls of fatty carbonadoes, enjoyed aggressively South African style: barbecued outdoors.

After a UCT extra-mural conference on South African prose (in January, 1976), which had proved as desultory as the previous year's one on poetry had been decisive, Richard and I took Nadine Gordimer on the meat-run to Onrust. The week-end started tranquilly, adapting to the rhythms of that artists' hide-away. Jack took Nadine, Richard and I bathing, but this time conspicuously on the main public beach. There was a reason for this: the trans-Indian rollers thundering in had caught Uys earlier that morning and bashed his false teeth out. We were now to dredge for them in the surf with our toes. Garrulous Uys had to endure the worst punishment for him – muteness – a little

longer, for we could not succeed in that churning mass. Conditions were too turbulent. For hours we sheltered from the gale in the sizzling dunes, the only shade from a 'Whites Only' noticeboard. We were stranded like beachcombers.

By the Sunday the blast had strengthened. Nadine and I had to catch a plane back to Johannesburg and wondered if it could take off. On his rambling property Jack was nothing but a conservator, and right-wing neighbours had set it alight before. At the end of such a drought, he lived on acres of tinder. We picnicked out in the raging tempest, wet sacks at hand to douse any sparks blown from the coals. Some camper upwind was not as cautious; by 2.00 p.m. the mountain behind was a raging, advancing bushfire; by 2.30 we were half encircled. Jan and Marjorie broke in to help soak the homestead. With lethargic hoses we pointed into roiling clouds of yellow bush-smoke. Accustomed to threats and paranoia, wiry Jack made other practical damping manoeuvres – he was not prepared to have quite a proportion of the South African arts incinerated at one go. To Nadine and I, querulous in the roaring inferno, he just said: go. Richard I thought demented but ever wise: for some reason he was soaping our hired Beetle. With Nadine ducking beside her overnight bag in the front seat, everyone yelling and choking with encouragement along the lines of 'You can do it, now, now!' I accelerated down Jack's dirt-track drive.

Talk about sitting on a time-bomb. The tangle of wattle and Port Jackson ahead, heated to the point of ignition, just whooshed up on either side of the car. The wipers ground away at a mush of lather and firebrands, the wheels spinning in the sand. The ignition point of petrol is evidently higher than bluegum, for the tank failed to explode. On the broader main road a wall of flame simply parted, like the Red Sea, to let us through. For miles we didn't slow down, or even look back.

At the airport we could not raise Jack, as his phonelines were burnt. Later that night I raised Richard, back safely in Cape Town – much relieved jesting about an 'inflammable situation' which had been 'kept under control'.

An equally unexpected occasion started innocently enough when Richard and I met up at a David Philip launch of a set of reproductions of Bushman Rock Art, on which he had wagered most of his resources. Always with Richard around it went without saying that we all catered for one another privately – segregated eating places were not only off limits, but irrelevant. Richard had pointedly refused to join the local PEN Club on the grounds that they were prepared to beg for a 'permit' for him to dine with them in public. But that week, to much publicity, some prestigious restaurants had succeeded in becoming 'open' to 'international' diners of colour. Shamefacedly I mentioned the new and attractive circumstance; yes, Richard and I would now test the truth of this. Only as I write have the separate amenities – the theatres, cinemas and libraries Richard could not enter during his life – begun to go unreserved. That was also the week that in Lancaster House the 'Rhodesian'

settlement was being satisfactorily concluded. Photos of Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo began replacing those of Ian Smith on the front pages.

I said I would not phone the Harbour Café, the famous tourist restaurant on the Cape Town waterfront, either to make a booking or confirm if I could bring my so-called coloured friend along; we should go without fuss – surely they would have a corner table, in an alcove or behind a curtain if necessary, for two respectable-looking singles. Richard phoned them instead, and in his most toffee accent reserved a large central table. As an afterthought he informed them that he was bringing his *whaat* companion along . . . *'White* – you know, freckles and red hair – Caucasoid, *Aryan.'* Apparently that was unexceptionable.

Richard drove, in his new air-conditioned Toyota Cressida, and what with headrests and piped Vivaldi I suppose he did resemble some new African big-spender. At the quay he pulled up before the front of the Harbour Café, left the car idling with the doors open and threw the keys to some passing dock-hand to park. At our very central – indeed, spotlit – table, I suggested as ever we should 'go Dutch', whereupon Richard ruefully displayed his wallet – as usual he did not have a cent on him. Fearing financial overcommitment, I opted for a prawn omelette, but Richard was, for the first time in his life, to have nothing less than their world-famous Seafood Platter. Borne by three nervous Malays in tarbooshes, this trencher duly arrived for inspection: mounds of yellow rice, studded with whole abalones, Red Romans, bordered by mussels and a few dozen shrimps peeled to the neck for garnish. A Cape lobster on top. A fourth servitor, draped in napkins, struggled in under a warm fingerbowl in which floated bisected lemons. Behind us was a wall of Stellenbosch wines sufficient to reverse the effect of international boycotts.

Richard, I assumed, knew what he was doing. He sampled each succulent item – took huge bites out of them. By the time he was down to the shrimps, he was flipping hollow shells onto the linoleum floor. Then, if you please, he shook his head sombrely and ordered the remains of the dish back to the kitchen on the grounds that it was not properly cooked.

Before the second trencher could arrive, we were disturbed by a coach-load of sightseers who filled the tables surrounding us. American tourists, obviously, in South Africa on a state-sponsored propaganda tour. The message went round in an only too audible undertone that, yes, now they did believe: why, even the most sacred historical places were admitting *negroes now.* Apartheid was utterly in the museum. The tour-guide beamed at us, the living proof.

This caused Richard to falter, so he took a break to think the situation through in the toilet. The Harbour Café had none of its own, so he strode purposefully down the wharf to a concrete bunker marked MALES – WHITES ONLY. Maybe this act of defiance was committed by mistake, but it certainly kindled his better spirits. He returned to relish the second platter, which naturally by this time was congealed.

During the arrival of the third trencher I availed myself of the same escape route, heading for the corresponding concrete bunker distinctly marked MALES – NON-WHITES ONLY. I wondered if defying segregated loos in reverse counted as a crime, but really premonitions of ruin at the rate of R60 per Seafood Platter were also troubling me. There another culinary ritual of a bizarre and bloody kind was about to be in progress. Four Taiwanese fishermen, who had absolutely nowhere else to go and were desperate, whipped open a bundle of sacking. Someone's flabby pet Chow was tumbled out in front of my stall, and before it had a second to reorientate, had its throat slit. Fresh red meat for the long voyage home, one supposes, draining into the handbasin. Nor did the jerking Chow go back East whence it came that readily. My trouser-cuffs were drenched in red bodily fluids.

While Richard was now not to be deterred in redressing three centuries of wrong, I tried not to convey the reasons for my queasiness. He clapped for the Special Desserts, and now six flunkeys in full regalia vied to land the embossed list before him first. He firmly believed he had at last been recognized in his own city – not as a heavy tipper, but as a writer of banned books – and why should I spoil his fun. I think he had Peach Melba, ice-cream with hot chocolate sauce and crème brûlée on the side. Coffee for me; black, without milk.

The American delegates had long tired of this messy Cape camaraderie and it came time for the tab. Credit cards were a novelty then and we had exceeded my credit limit, though in deference to their guest it was pointed out repeatedly to me that they had not charged more than once for their speciality. Richard was striding towards the door in slow motion, shaking the hand and patting the back of the head waiter and now some dozen others, cooks, bottlewashers and sundry passers-by, who were forming a guard of honour for his send-off. I slipped off my new watch, promising to clear the difference on the morrow.

And that was when it all came finally clear. The owner wished to thank me for being so discriminating as to have brought Joshua Nkomo to his humble eating-place. I never went back for the watch, nor informed Richard of the mistaken identity.

For reasons not connected to the above, Richard and I fell out. Both of us became petty and spiteful. Richard had undertaken to review my books as they came out, and often earned more on the reviews than I did for whole works. He was becoming fearfully nitpicking and I was resentful. Also I erred fatally in trying to corner him into writing fresh material of his own. I offered to anthologize his BBC radio play, *Make like Slaves,* which to his delight some students had revived as a stage play for the Grahamstown Festival in 1976 – but that was based on short story material nearly two decades old. What I meant was: write something up-to-date. So much for chipping away at another

writer's block. Vigorous correspondence was the only upshot, then silence.

But in 1979, on a lecture-tour of the U.S., Richard was manoeuvred by others more conniving into a breakthrough. He was to be the keynote speaker at the closing banquet of the African Literature Association's conference at Bloomington, Indiana. Few memorable moments occur in those so efficient and routine scholarly procedures, but evidently Richard's speech was one such. He was cajoled into jettisoning his slagged-out and now outmoded position paper, and so – aged 48 – hauled forth the musty suitcase of his childhood souvenirs instead. This was the very material he had relentlessly suppressed in his thrust for respectability. This was Baldwin recovering *The Amen Corner,* or Soyinka his *Aké.* This was Richard, funny and tearful and piercing, without grudges and inspired, putting himself back on the world's literary map. So unblocked was Richard at that banquet that in the following decade no less than five books would flow from that vein.

Writing Black, the autobiography of 1981, was the first. A no-tell listing of his travels and literary encounters, it was hurried and often disproportionate: his total recall of airports, trains and ships, and increasingly of menus, crowded out the testimony of an extraordinary life of ingenuity and cheek that one hoped for. But he chose to be self-effacing, and passages at each homecoming do build up a groundswell of threat. After London in 1963: 'I am an unenfranchised, segregated, semi-citizen.' After New York in 1966: 'If I had any illusions that coming back with a post-graduate degree from a great American university would improve my personal position these were very soon dispelled.' After Oxford in 1974: 'I was still an unenfranchised Black suffering under a policy of racial discrimination, born and nurtured in a notorious slum in a beautiful city in a bigoted country.' And in conclusion:

> I met hundreds of people of every type and nationality . . . We were alike in many respects but those who were not Black South Africans differed from me in one important way. They could assert their individuality and establish their nationality . . . I could not say with full conviction, 'I am a South African.'

I wrote to him, saying how I admired his frankness. On Christmas Day, 1981, he replied: 'I'm glad you enjoyed the book. I don't think we should allow outside factors to destroy our friendship. I am certainly prepared to put the past aside.'

But old Rishard of Saloo was no longer. He was now Dr Richard M. Rive of 'Lyndall', 31 Windsor Park Avenue, Heathfield. Named after Schreiner's heroine, his high-tech custom-built villa nestled in the reeds of a bird sanctuary, a splendid fortification in Cape Town's permitted elite 'coloured' area. In the neighbourhood was also the poet-philosopher, Adam Small. There his

lifestyle was conspicuously flashy. One fellow 'coloured' writer, to show his scorn for Richard the sell-out, drunkenly pissed through his study window and over the word-processor.

With the Onrust set breaking up, Richard often visited Elsa Joubert and her husband, Klaas Steytler, in Oranjezicht, overlooking Cape Town city. He was passionately enthusiastic about Elsa's success with *Poppie Nongena* of 1978, the first novel in Afrikaans to carry a convincing black point of view. Much of Elsa's impetus derived from her reading of black African literature, including Richard's *Modern African Prose* so many years after the event.

Their neighbours, Cecil Skotnes the artist and his wife Thelma, entertained Richard as a regular. Their friendship led to Cecil illustrating the second selection of Richard's stories to be published in South Africa – *Advance, Retreat* – which once again ignored the law, because the bulk of them had been banned since his East German debut. As a friendly gesture Cecil also carved in relief the panels on the front doorway of Richard's villa with scenes from Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm.* This supposed extravagance caused an exasperated visiting Belgian scholar, when Richard must have overdone the disadvantaged Black man bit, to remark: 'But, Richard, in Europe only cathedrals have carved doors.'

The work everyone had been waiting for was Richard's novel of his boyhood, *'Buckingham Palace', District Six,* which got him back on the Heinemann list overseas and sold very well locally. Nostalgic, luridly funny and boisterous, the novel straight-forwardly reconstructed a vanished time and place. Its innocence and optimism, recollected during the grim uprisings of 1986, served as indictment enough, and contributed to a nation-wide upsurge in visions for an alternative South Africa. Mixed-cast musicals about District Six and Sophiatown also stomped out the news of ways of life that had been suppressed, even as the second state of emergency closed down the possibilities of reviving lost social glories. But so have the arts in general in contemporary South Africa become resistant to intimidation that they carry on nowadays; it would be unthinkable to be cowed with the scent of deliverance back in the air.

So Richard came to flourish as more than a survivor – as a participant in the new and massive mobilization of South Africans against their government. Sparking with fresh creative energy, he joined in everything. Not to miss out on the grassroots *Staffrider* movement, he contributed a new story to the magazine. Not to miss out on theatre for liberation, he was in there, reworking *Buckingham Palace* as a stage-play. He began and completed the second *Emergency* novel, which is to appear from David Philip posthumously.

In a now affable routine Richard and I kept trading professional chores, like dealing with visiting scholars braving their reputations to plug into the struggle and frenzy of an emergent society. With little tolerance for the usual poseurs and opportunists here to do us favours, we linked up in an informal screening

process: Richard in the Cape and I in Johannesburg would cold-shoulder one, take another to meet every other writer in each town. Occasionally, as councillors of the English Academy of Southern Africa, for our sins we'd decry the old guard and split a pizza in Braamfontein, before Richard joined his lifelong friend, Zeke Mphahlele, the first ever professor of African Literature in the country, deeply honoured by all. Or in Cape Town we'd meet at the Philips' or the Skotnes' home and update gossip.

If Richard had a sex-life, one supposed it was centred on only two women, both dead – Olive Schreiner and Ingrid Jonker. The Schreiner love was understandable enough, and all consuming. The Jonker one – fragments of chat about the two soul-siblings, charging around Cape Town on his scooter, she clutching from behind. Twenty years after her suicide, Richard's eyes would still fill. That, one guessed, was when he lost his heart, as had so many others; that confirmed his bachelorhood. If Richard was homosexual, even in the days of gay liberation he chose not to come out. Although moffiedom is a flourishing and flamboyant part of the Cape lifestyle, Richard never gave any indication he might have been attached to it. Of course, Richard had become a class of one; for him there was no logical companion.

So when he was killed on 4 June 1989, nights before the premiere of his new play at the Baxter Theatre, the *Cape Times* gave him all the attention it had withheld during his life:

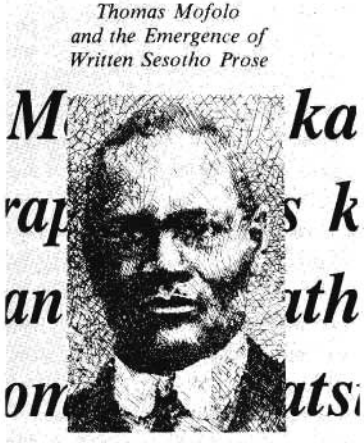
> One of South Africa's leading literary figures, poet and author Dr Richard Rive, 59, was found murdered in his home yesterday.
>
> Dr Rive was discovered lying face down in a blood-splattered passageway . . . He had been stabbed in the chest repeatedly . . . Furniture was overturned in the study and there were bloodstains on the wall, indicating Dr Rive had struggled with his killer . . . Police are investigating the possibility that Dr Rive knew his killer. There was no evidence of a forced entry . . . A knife was discovered outside the house and Dr Rive's white Toyota Cressida was missing . . . By late last night detectives had managed to establish that a microwave oven, a computer, computer parts and clothing were also missing from the house . . . It is not known how long Dr Rive had been dead.

On 13 June, after leaving a country-wide trail, the two youthful suspected killers surrendered to the police. They are reported to have said they did not know who Richard Rive was.

At the memorial service held at Hewat Training College, Mphahlele among many other speakers said: 'He had more to give us.'

Whether Richard's terrible end is reducible to yet another instance of the attrition of South Africa's constitutional racism, or was merely the verdict of

poverty delivered by two aggrieved rent-boys, is uncertain. But the former interpretation is likely to enter the mythology. Like so many others in South Africa, Richard was killed because he wished his spirit out of bondage.



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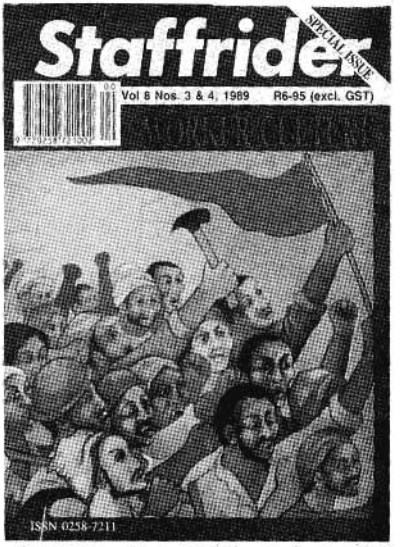

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LITERARY STANDARDS IN SA POETRY

Statements from a debate between Kelwyn Sole and Douglas Reid Skinner hosted by the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town 15 August 1989

Introduction

The issue being discussed today has been around for a long time, both in South Africa and elsewhere, but it is an issue which arises periodically with particular intensity, and we are currently in a period of such intensity. Over the past few months there have been reviews, letters in places like the *Weekly Mail,* articles in journals, little magazines and exchanges of various kinds in one way or another focussing on this whole issue of literary standards. The issue is certainly timely for us, and both of our speakers are in positions to contribute fruitfully to the kind of debate which is once again unfolding. Both speakers are practising poets and are engaged in the kinds of issues we are discussing, as practitioners. They are both also involved in certain kinds of institutional roles in which issues regarding literary standards arise and are worked through.

Nick Visser

Statement by Douglas Reid Skinner

In a pre-debate meeting we were asked by the chairperson to present a manifesto as a point of departure. I've written something which is less manifesto than it is a necessarily simple, brief and candid sketch of some of my thoughts and feelings. In the interests of clarity I have boiled that down to one statement, which is this: that I trust poetry before I trust criticism. Having said that, let me elaborate a few of those thoughts and feelings.

The 'debate' about literary standards is, on evidence, very complex, shifting and heterogeneous. We have been witness, I think, to too much zealotry, rhetoric, intolerance and 'position taking' than has been or is warranted. It has led to a great deal of miscommunication. Too often I have sensed the projection of personality, too rarely the presence of clarity and wisdom, and clamour, in spite of its champions, can never substitute for reason in human affairs. I much prefer what Charles Pierce had to say of Philosophy, that we ought 'to trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one'. I don't feel particularly bound to one framework of reference nor any particular set of critical precepts; intellectual fashion is as fickle as hemlines and hairstyles. Anyone familiar with twentieth century physics knows that a description is only a map, not the territory, that it always takes multiple perspectives to adequately describe even the simplest of physical phenomena.

If I had to describe my critical sense of things, it would be a peculiar mix of *pragmatism* and *idealism,* and I use those words not in their acquired critical sense, but in a prior, more simple sense. Pragmatically speaking, I manage to get a good deal of various kinds of work done. Idealistically speaking, I'm fool enough to do it without being paid. I make decisions on the ground every day, the majority of which are rather mundane. Running a literary magazine is largely about economics and hard work. Editorially, few choices are of real importance, in part, I suppose, because literary magazines are a small-scale activity in society. Generally speaking, I make editorial choices on what I would call technical grounds. I often consult others, frequently deferring to their more qualified opinions. My sense of social engagement is mostly to do with promoting creative writing by making channels of publication accessible to writers and by assisting and encouraging new writers. I do not see this as being particularly political other than in the sense that everything can be said to be political or, even more fundamentally, economic.

If I was asked to come up with one word to describe myself in terms of my own writing, it would be *practitioner,* an apprentice to what I view as an extremely demanding art, one with many notable practitioners in its long history: the authors of the Upanishads, Homer, the authors of the Book of Psalms, Virgil, Dante, Basho, Milton, Han Shan, Wordsworth, Rumi, Rilke, Montale and Eliot, to name but a few. I discovered poetry and writing at eighteen. At that time, though inexperienced, I was certain of a great deal. For twenty-two years I've puzzled, explored, unravelled, written and talked in an effort to understand what that discovery meant and continues to mean, what the *mystery* is at its heart. Over the years I've learned a little about the process of writing by doing it and studying what other writers have had to say about doing it, the mystery at the heart of it has remained implacably elusive, and for reasons not too dissimilar to certain inescapable conclusions by Wittgenstein, Gödel and Heinsenberg about the limits of understanding in language, mathematics and physics. Indeed, I have now gained some experience, but I'm certain of much less.

I do feel that few poems and even less writing about poetry is original, illuminating and enduring. Remarkable poems, it seems to me, give one entry into the mystery of *being* in a way that taking poems apart through the formal operations of social or other theories does not. Analysis may give one entry to other fascinating mysteries, but it also invariably distances one from the subject. To dissect the frog you have to kill it – though thankfully we are now capable of mapping internal structures without killing, using magnetic resonance, co-axial tomography and computers. Much of the art of writing poems, it seems to me, has to do with learning how to get out of the way, to relinquish one's ego, to let the unconscious speak. The other half is learning the prosodic and other skills that are the hallmark of the finest practition-

ers in the language. The third half is learning how to read like a practitioner.

I don't think that all poems are poetry or that all poetry is contained within poems. I do believe that there are formal and technical characteristics to the practice of writing which are public and understandable. I don't think that form in poetry is random or expedient: my own experience tells me that it is fundamental to art. As the Italian Nobel Laureate, Eugenio Montale, put it: *In poetry what matters is not the content, but the form.* This is not a strange idea. Nature, after all, is *all form.*

Poetry, it seems to me, bridges reason and emotion, idea and music, arises in the zone of difference between conscious and unconscious. It is one way, the oldest perhaps, we have of forming and saying who we are. I believe that I stand or fall (or stand and fall) by the poems I have written, not the various, changing opinions I hold. So it makes sense to me to read a poem and let that stand as my manifesto.

THE VIEW

Rain. The colours deepen. The light
goes early and the lights go on.
And the bay's interminable grey
stretches all the way from

empty wharves and idle cranes,
past the island of impounded days,
past the tanker heading westward
loaded down with oil. All the way

past the coastline's slow curve
to the blurred lines of horizon
where an aeroplane slowly rises
in widening circles beyond

mountains covered with cloud.
It flies to the north and away.
Words don't stop what is going on.
They are what has gone wrong.

(from *The Unspoken*, The Carrefour Press, 1988, Douglas Reid Skinner)

Statement by Kelwyn Sole

I would like to start with two quotes by jazz musicians:

> 'There is no music without order. But that order is not necessarily related to any single criterion of what order should be . . . It is not a question, then, of "order" as opposed to "disorder", but is rather a question of recognising different ideas and expressions of order.'
>
> Cecil Taylor

> 'What most people accept as being creative for the most part are standard sort of systems either technically or conceptually. At some point these have been embraced to the degree where it's not so much about creativity any more as much as it's about fulfilling other people's ideas about form.'
>
> Anthony Braxton, Saxophonist

What I want to stress with these two quotes is the fact that poetry, as all other literature and indeed all other art forms, is evaluated with sets of criteria or beliefs which are historically, socially and philosophically mutable. These systems of belief are what we recognize as aesthetic criteria. These systems become, in time, the enemy of all experimental or avant garde art and are constantly in need of being overturned. There is no one commonly uniform recognized order or standard in poetry as in other arts; we have to analyse and evaluate poetry first and foremost in terms of what sense, what formal order, what understanding and expression of the world is being attempted, and by whom.

All human beings evaluate: they have preferences, they have ideas of what is good or bad. But different groups of people can evaluate poetry in different ways. There is certainly a degree of agreement in this process of evaluation; but there is also individual and social division which go hand in hand with divergencies in viewpoint, and which allow different standards and ways of reading to exist. What I am saying is that while we all evaluate, our evaluations are relative, depending to some extent on who we are and where we come from. There is no one single criterion available to all human beings to judge what is good or bad, and I would guess that this is especially obvious in a country like South Africa. I also believe that notions of 'good' and 'bad' are not intrinsic to a work, but very much part of the way a work is *read*. What habits and expectations of reading we bring along to poetry influences how we read it, what is 'good' and 'bad'. We are to some extent talking about reading here. I suspect that Douglas Reid Skinner would agree with me. Where I suspect we might part company, and certainly where I do part company with

the proclamations of a certain type of literary critic in this country, is that I do not believe that there is one coherent and everlasting standard of what is 'good' or 'bad' in poetry.

I perceive that there is still a small group of critics and editors in this country who respond with horror to this relativism I have been propounding. To point out that the type of critic I have in mind is generally white, middle class and male (while pertinent) is not in itself enough. In some future dispensation these people could possibly be part of another group. What I find objectionable about them is their reluctance to abandon their idea that there is or should be one type of 'good' poetry we should all know about. To give you an example, Lionel Abrahams, editor of *Sesame*, writing in his magazine about Jeremy Cronin's views on recent black oral poetry, says:

> 'Now I have no doubt that from time to time the substance of such performances would indeed be poetry. But judging alone by Mr Cronin's quotations, the mass of it is no such thing, despite what its performers and audiences, and Mr Cronin, call it. There are ritualised slogans, jeers and exhortations. Essentially simple utterances are sometimes enhanced as to force and form through the addition of a musical element. Indisputably this material is deserving of study, and moreover precisely as Cronin urged, in intimate relationship with the situations that constitute its matrix.
>
> But to categorise it as poetry is to invite its divorce from the matrix, involve many irrelevant considerations and confuse the nature of its meaning and importance. Cronin surely appreciates this fact, but in choosing to ignore it, in my view, he is attacking the meaning and importance of poetry as traditionally understood.'

My second quote, to make a slightly different point, comes from Douglas Reid Skinner from the pages of *Upstream* in his review of a book by John Ashbery. He says:

> 'Many factors – taste, emotional state, print size among others – could be shown to cause this inability to engage with the text at hand. Too often, it seems, with Ashbery the reason has something to do with the writer's strategy, with the deliberate obliqueness, the qualities of inattention and drifting narrative focus which seem to be deliberately selected by him. He refines and populates the imaginative space, his particular universe of language, with occasions that seem effortlessly transient, fascinating though they may be on the level of images in and of themselves . . . the opening poem, holds the attention from image to image, and yet by the end there seems little narrative purchase left and the symbolising has a randomness about it: all the air of a story, and yet seem-

ingly with the thread or key deliberately withheld. This may well bespeak a certain relativism of meaning popular in theory, but whether or not it makes poetry is at least questionable.'

Now I think these quotes bring out something quite important. The Abrahams quote exhibits editorial ignorance. Abrahams seems totally unconversant with notions of form, notions of indigenous forms like the praise poem, which a lot of the oral black poets in South Africa are coming from and are to some extent using. Skinner, on the other hand, while not ignorant of what Ashbery is doing, refuses to concede that there may be different ways to conceive, write and enjoy poetry. They are both using an absolute, inflexible standard of poetry that they are measuring these examples against. My question would be what price the black poet with oral indigenous traditions who writes to magazines like *Sesame,* and what price the poet who has used Ashbery or Raworth or one of the modern British or American poets as a model, who sends a poem like that to *Upstream?* These are critics who are not prepared to concede that all of our views of poetry are to some extent subjective and relative. They want the high ground of final arbitration, because they believe there is, finally, something as singularly and objectively simple as 'good' poetry; they believe they understand what it is; and they believe the rest of us are 'aesthetic illiterates' (to use an unfortunate quote first coined in the *Weekly Mail*) who need to be educated towards their objective understanding. 'Bad' poetry is not something that should even be tolerated in their view – it should be stamped out because it is 'stupefying'.

I believe in South Africa especially, where so many different experiences of reading poetry, different formal criteria are looked for or preferred, different expectations of relevant subject matter exist, such a view is particularly shortsighted. We live in a country obviously sundered by different class, racial, ethnic, gender and even regional points of view, and consequently multifarious in its cultural and literary tastes and traditions. I think this is the most obvious problem of any clique or cliques setting themselves up as arbiters of taste and arbiters of what is 'good' poetry in this country. Critics and editors are in the job of making discriminations: but I feel we are still in a situation where a tiny group of critics and editors have far too much relative power – they control most poetry magazines and literary journals, they sit in judgement of most poetry competitions, they sit in professorial splendour on the boards of the various academies, they perform the great weight of the reviewing in this country – and their lack of sense of relativeness astounds and worries me. They have a power of exclusion far in excess, it seems to me, of their powers of discrimination.

But again, to talk about this phenomenon simply in racial terms, as the black consciousness critics of the 1970s did, is not enough. I believe these critics have a fairly outdated notion of what is 'good' even in Europe and the U.S.

at the moment. I don't want to argue it here, but I believe that what we see in practice in at least seventy percent of the cases in South Africa is a type of colonial off-shoot of late-Romantic notions of what poetry is and what poets should be. I would just like to point out that these notions are themselves culturally and historically specific.

One of the more exciting things about this country is that there is no single standard. We live in a time where everything is up for grabs, where one has to re-examine one's aesthetic and political assumptions all the time, where so much cultural transformation is in fact taking place. If some of the poetry and other art being produced right now is transitory, so what. The process of change itself is worth it; and I cannot understand the eagerness and vigour with which some poetry critics pounce on poetry they don't like and throw it out of court. It seems to me we are in a process of change which none of us fully understand yet, and it seems to me that the relativism that we are experiencing at the moment is particularly important for this process of change.

*These statements are published with the courtesy of the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

The Condemned Men

and almost all hours
in the stillness ...
between the uneasiness
of dawn and night in the consternation
another day
(another dismal day)
almost ...
we repeat it to ourselves
as we recall
regret
as we rely on instinct
on change and untrustable destiny
weighing all on history and a dream
'what we wish the turn of events'

as we stagger we mutter it
to ourselves
thinking only of survival
here where borrowed means forge men's
ultimate action
where the road never ends
muttering
how cold nights twinned us here
like rats caught in icy lakes
sensing defeat, and thinking — really
is this it
how it all clicks together
the final point of our journeying

searching for it
(after all those nights, those
cold nights)
the hope never dies
it must never die
it should never die
our hope has to find other means
of survival
a new way of expression
saying the same essential thing
in a new way
in a different medium

as we curse the stars
we curse the heavens

the life around us the life beneath us
the dead life beneath us
bent and crooked
as we're scurried across

perpetuated
like dead pictures — unbelievable
like still-life
flown across our existence
bent and crooked

and yeah again we sense it
the strangeness of wasted life
coming strong
(not enough not good at all)
how men's policies reshape our past
the years of our search
the days of our peril

now our lives are invisible
our being here immaterial.

M.M. Nyezwa

More Than Scratches to a Dinosaur?

Ink flows through volumes of text
History flowing
Branching
Out into rivulets and streams
Thrown over-cliff where drops might mingle with sunlight.
Then revolution passes
Into
A calm lake
Whose river leads
Away,
Ends in the sea
Or is it just the beginning?

Cherrine Sajer

A Problem With Doors

I never believe they will open quite right.

The handle will stick.
Or the click I get will be only half latch,
Half safety catch
As some Rambo from Z-Squad
Picks his teeth, ready
To tickle the trigger
Of his all-purpose Uzi
And drill me just as I
Step in. I can imagine

How I'll fall — my blood
A surprise too slippery
To be plugged by my fingers —
How I'll kneel on the floor
And stare. It's ridiculous.

Doors have lost their innocence.

On top of it all, everywhere
There are doors.
(Most of them locked.)

As for trying to knock,
It's like that picture
I once saw
Of Jesus — King Jesus,
His head
With its blood drops
And bush of thorns
Tilted
At the angle
That indicates
Doubt — in one hand, a lantern,
The other hand
Raised
To knock. And beneath him
The legend:
"LOVE LA LA LA"
Or something. Except, I'm not
Jesus. And anyway, it's useless to knock.

It's getting so heavy that even my sleep
Is populated with doors. I dream
They fall shut while I stiffen
(Or part of me does). Then I roll over
And pitch
Down the bottomless
Well. An iron lid
Groans. I am faintly aware
Of distant helpless hammerings,
Thin screams. And at my heels, struggling
And panting like a dog, flops
The hangman's black bag without
The hangman in it. Or I'm back
In the long dim corridor of some sweaty hotel
Of my childhood. It smells of stale beer,
And a puddle keeps growing
Under the door whose number
I can't quite make out. And I wake up
Cold with knowing that the wet sheet
Under me is the precipitate of pure fright.

My next step might logically be
To attack a door and rip it
Off its hinges —
But what if the posts
Were to sprout
A double row of nails,
Ready to snap
Like some Mediaeval trap?

No. The most I can do is scrawl
On the face of the nearest door:
HELP!
WHO KILLED DULCIE SEPTEMBER?
R.I.P. RICK TURNER
DANGER GEVAAR INGOZI

I seem to see the long slow burst
Of the detonation — the first
Bright wavering light. I feel
That sense of heavy numbed limbs
Planted, going nowhere,
And the terrible ripping shock.

And I think of you, Albie Sachs.

On a lovely day of high blue sky,
Tumbling clouds and the sea — a holiday
If ever there was one — you crossed
The streets of the old colonial quarter
And stopped beside your car to look about you
And breathe. Then you slipped
The key into the lock
And triggered the explosion
That tore off your arm
And left you on your back
In the street, struggling to get up

And in that endless instant,
Fully conscious.

While I curl up
Tight in my corner
And rock
And beat my head
As though a hole in a wall
Were the only way out,
And anyway, it is all just
My own paranoia —

A problem
With doors.

Peter Anderson

Her Car

She knocked gleefully at my cottage door
Held my hand to exit
She took me into her luxurious car
Rolled with me over the mountains

She told me about the wreckage in New-Canada
Then I remembered she's from home

Sibusiso Ngubane

To Have No Art

I hate the sunshine
I hate its
12 hours
that fly like the swallow
and the sea-gull
fly
leaving a dead melody
in my throat.

M.M. Nyezwa

Dawn of the Living Dead

Haike wena
Andrew Zondo
I reckon you
did not mean
to injure civilians
but how could
you differentiate
a soft target
from a hard target
when even civilians
are securitized, conscripted.
Haike abuti Andrew
like abuti Benjamin Moloise
you did
what you did
because they did
what they did
to you
to us
Moenie worry Comrades
you are not dead
but living in our
hearts and respect
Molo Ashley Kriel!

Mogorosi (Lancelot) Nawa

Home

If I could build you a house
o love I would fetch you a
waterfall for the front door
windows of the lightest wind
and walls deep as shadows
Silence would cover you
from summer's lightning and twilight
light the way to your bed.

Kobus Moolman

Birds of Colour

I see the birds of vengeance
flapping around our undoer's scalp
in broken lines

I hear the flapping
of the birds of prey
itching to redeem the scars
behind the scars of my people

I see the birds of wisdom
unresaying their unheeded warning

I see the birds of confrontation
descending to clutch their
provoked beaks and ravage
the provokers' no-more-heads

I see the birds of exploitation
pleading for mercy they did not
once chirp

Cry blood, devour, tear
the birds of liberation,
tear the wrong apart
to prepare Africa South
for the cooing birds of
Harmony!

Mogorosi (Lancelot) Nawa

Tragic Year

I
This has been a year of tragedy;
grief penetrates the heart.
The maelstrom of anger spirals
onto the tongues of the wounded.
Hatred for the enemy corrodes
the lives of the young.
The deranged potentates
deliver their speeches,
and the country oscillates
on its axis of pain.

The frenzied pace of time
lapses into the mundane.
Troops in battle fatigues
patrol strategic points;
search for the clandestine
trafficking of guns and grenades.
Bland reports disembody
an inflamed sense of loss.
During quiet moments we mourn
the deaths and incarcerations;
remain determined to resist
the demented dogma of obese men.

II
The various patterns of partial light
are dulled by the slow blaze of the sun
as it begins to cross the day.

Remnants of a gale shimmer.
Strangely romantic, it twirls a daisy
in its frosty breath
and lapses into laziness.

A single bird . . .

A single bird chirps ignorantly
perhaps satirically;
sent by them to fool
and to entice.
It took flight and shrunk
to a speck of reconnaissance.

There are no human sounds this morning.
The placid atmosphere insinuates
a tremor, that may yet disturb
the flat monotony of everything.

The untrusting bird returns
with armoured men in steel trucks.

But violence fails to exorcise,
only exacerbates the strife.

Mark Espin

Third Eye in the Gloom

On the outskirts of the metropolis
the churned up earth is dumped.
Wheels turn against the day;
lift ore from extreme depths.
Down below men sweat profusely
break stone for bread and sleep;
headlamps the third eye in the gloom.

Gumboots squelch in the puddles.
The cocopans roll along the rails
pushed by men with wet
bandannas on their heads.
Outwardly the miners endure
abuse from racist gangers.
In the narrow caverns
the stench of rotting wood
pervades the ritual of work.

The Highveld night is cold.
Winds wail through disused structures.
Activity at pithead increases
as the shaft elevator ascends.
The headlamps are doused
for another session of sleep.
In the middle of the mine
danger patiently awaits human error.
Corporate executives are nonchalant
like vicious gods about a sacrifice.

Mark Espin

Cliche

The scenario becomes
I imagine
not unlike Rome
before its decline,
not unlike China
prior to its junta,
not unlike Africa
pre-liberation.
With so many performances
of not dissimilar acts
why cannot we learn
from theatrical history,
of misery and madness,
suicides and lies,
of incontinent hysteria?

Like a play of one act,
reppettittive
and surreal,
Brechtian and Beckettian.
Like a lost plot
of the heart,
lonely, desperate, Shepardian.
Like the metaphysical
thrill of a movie,
the just-can't-touch
reality,
the frustration and
extravagance.
Is this my
Southern Africa?

I should remove the 'ern'
preceding Africa
to be honest.
To be candid,
I should strip
this life, this death
of its menacing inertia,
should unbridle my tears,
cock my fists,
strangle my heart, its
sentimental throb,
pick a stone to

pummel my neighbours
from their lethargy
and then turn upon myself
the anguish of a generation.

Jonathan L. Fox

En Mandela Hoor Alles

Ek laaikie lahnies nie
hulle is vuil
en treat my soes dirt
maar daais 'n nogge spiets, sien djy
nou die bra van my isse politico
soe op 'n nongolorse style
hy whietie according die time Boetalesie
die lahnies overseas nca vertel
en Mandela hoor alles
nou, daai ou, anytime kan hy die maang spasa
maar die time is not right
dinge moet nog hie' gebeur
dan vat hy die walk
according call hy Boetalesie
en vertel hom, 'Kap ziep, djy maak stof'
Hey, die bra van my!!

Au hoesit, Boeta Achmat
time is taait, nê
of hoe?

Mike Weeder

Geskille

Om geskille rasioneel
en vreedsaam by te lê
benodig mens 'n Casspir
so word gesê —

die kuur
vir gewete
lê in restriksies
op krete —

'cos all is well
in die land van die Boer ...

se moer
se moer
se moer

Richard Geldenhuys

Inside

there was one day
when he came home from work
and the roof blew off

in his head

there was one day when he came home from work and the roof blew off

in his head
animals are dancing like shotguns
and the sky roars down on him
like his grandfather with the vicious belt

nobody could find shelter
the walls looked on weakly
he ran round and round in his head
screaming
help me, help me
animals dancing like shotguns
while children cowered against walls

it went on for so long

it went on and on.

Karen Press

Poetry (defined)

poetry
is
the boiling
of water
in a pot
gurgling –
like soldiers
at a training session
readying
to go to war

Kaizer Mabhilidi Nyatsumba

Priorities

there is the question of housing
the people need shelter now, before the rain,
and the land shrinks under its burden of homeless

she thinks of a place where the nights are safe for a woman alone

before this, even, there is the need
to put food in people's mouths
the next generation is starving to death on our doorsteps

in her mind, she walks through the moonlight to the water's edge

what of the migrant workers — they live like cattle in the compounds,
their voices not heard in meetings like these
they have families, scattered like dry wood across the hills

she follows the silver trail of surf northwards, she climbs rocks
and smells the night mountain

there is bloodshed ahead of us:
beware those who think liberation comes
through noisy discussion: we must prepare ourselves

on and on up the coast, playful as a cat with its shadow, she
discovers the other half of the world

it is no good making blueprints for the future
our demands must arise out of people's daily struggles
to keep alive, we cannot go beyond that now

she is alive, she is alive, she cannot demand more than this
fluorescent cage of public sanctuary

Karen Press

Scissors

The wife who shocked Life's cord to life
has long weathered to dust.
The old bird sits hollow-boned
her skin loosely wound around her.

She perches on the precipice of life
as she peers into the landscapes of
her past
her lives
her masks.

I did not notice her wintering till I woke
to see her cloaked in all her 7 decades.
Subtly, imperceptibly she impressed
her presence on the seasons of my life.
She saw me through the emerald of my Spring-dawns
into the coral of my present Summer-dusks.

Ancient eyes squat, sharpening scissors
as they pass through trickling hourglasses
towards the dangling fibres of a soul
awaiting the cut into eternity.

She
is soon to fly and
the flight's permanence
will flay.

Deela Khan
10 August 1987

Mediaeval Smokescreen

Sing us a ballad Julia
you wring the strings of hearts.
When nature's all a-burgeoning
love lies frozen fast.

We hear the gun-groans splutter
as children burst their hearts ...
brain and bone-blown thistles ...
as the seeds of pain are ground.

Our air is dank with spirits
of lost bodies
in crude graves. No priests
no kin ... no service ...
no lives nor souls to save.

Your voice's so soothing Julia ...
but your lyric's far removed.
It's so nice to savour innocence ...
it's so pretty and so unreal.

Change your tune my lovely Julia ...
Splash your lines with fire of the age.
Nourish your song with the
starvation of body and soul ...
Fit it with killermachines, and
blow it with blighted love, and
Nature's rust and the psychopath's lust ...
And your ballad will lift our souls.

The world turns swaddled in its womb of blood
as blood kills and sluices and floods and
clots and rots with the bloodlines of the ages.

Sing on, your tune is catchy
it wends its way to the head.
Blaze on, your song is scorching,
it oils the fires of pain.

Deela Khan
June 1987

Going to Evensong, to See the Pope

Nervously, unshriven, I approach
policemen holding back an idle crowd.
I am allowed to pass. Should I be proud
to have an invitation to the church

so seldom entered, for the papal prayer?
Am I a journalist, a mere tourist,
sensation-seeking spiritual opportunist,
who goes to church because the Pope is there?

These people, *povo*, call them what you will,
who have no ticket, who stand out on the street –
am I more worthy of His Holiness to greet
than they? Is it merely profane thrill

to shake the soft and gentle gold-ringed hand
of *pontifex Romanus maximus*?
The English version of the prayer of Jesus
the Polish accent reads. And should I stand
like the Salvation Army officers
I am beside? I slide down with my fears
onto my knees, as, hassockless, I'd planned,
upon the floor of stone; a need to feel
how small I am. The blessing comes. I steal
a bliss, a sudden joyous emptiness,
as seven cardinals all make the sign
together as the Pope holds up benign
fingers: a simple gesture, God's caress.

'To the Glory of God' reads the inscription.
A Maltese cross and 49 old names
of those who fell, achieving meagre fames
in modern Matabeleland's subjection,

their conquest's bitter ends commemorated,
engraved in brass, a plaque above my head.
No mention of machine-gunned thousands dead
unmarked, unnamed, their sacrifice cremated

upon imperial expansion's pyre. The cross
reserved for English, Afrikaner names.
The Polish-Roman now the one who claims
the blackman's soul beside me: gain or loss?

Gianfranco Ferre-suited agents.
Italian security for him
whose pilgrimage, so gentle and so grim,
Christ's blood proclaims. But in among the incense,

brought here from ancient European cities,
there lingers yet the stench of blood, unsung
within this church. For who here among
the cardinals and bishops ever pities

the crucifixion of the Ndebele?
Above the altar hangs the shape of man
carved in white marble. Do I believe He can
atone for masses killed, and killed unfairly?

I don't know what he thinks, but take his hand.
I, uncommunicated. Foreign. Damned?
Sightseers and police: the street is jammed.
His Holiness listens to the marimba band.

Tony Ronaldson
14 September 1988

Karanga Pastoral: An Archaeological Dig by Pupils from Christian Brothers and Girls' Colleges Bulawayo. Great Zimbabwe, May 1988.

The refuge settlement is dug by girls:
the satyr of the strata rules the kopje;
in swinish dirt, glass beads are rich as pearls,
statistics for the cleft-foot doctor's copy.
The traded trinkets of a thousand years
and open-fired patterns of old meals:
the nymphs' digging pots of ancestral beers,
more fragments of a shattered past reveals.
This paradise was lost. Men came inside
their women's huts to eat, and learnt to wear
the buttons of a British victory ride,
unearthed by daughters of Leander Starr.
    Their sifted shards the deity caresses.
    This Shona dust. These laughing shepherdesses.

Tony Ronaldson

River Deep

Along the banks of the Liesbeeck River
at a point

where the weeping willows gather
to stoop

and sweep
the slow moving waters

there

Mrs Goliath's grandson, Bertie
whose father was in Pollsmoor Prison
whose mother ran away to Durban,

drowned.

Mike Weeder

No One Must Know

And no one in this village
Must ever know that
You were once my man
You were once a deep lover of mine.

And no one in this village
Must ever know that
You had no money in your pocket
Having given it all to me.

And no one in this village
Must ever know that
You were a wizard
Who used muti against me
That sent me racing to your door.

Mduduzi Mthembu

Portrait

I have seen manchild
beyond the poet's portrait
wrapped by this alien tyranny
within wrinkled and wriggled faces
beyond vacuums of thought

manchild
bleeds portraits of dismembered hopes

ah!
we in this canopy
of dissolved hallucinative mirages
we are drowning beneath
streams of firebrands

AZANIA ...
DAUGHTER TO AFRIKA
WE SING PAMBERI NE CHIMURENGA!
with the celebration of UNITY

HA!
VAKOMANA NE VASIDZANA!
ONE IN COMRADESHIP ...
the beat from the marimba-drums
and the whistling of the penny-flute
from the bushes of AFRIKA
herald the arrival of UHURU ...

AZANIA
look beyond the horizons
of colonial and neo-colonial pitfalls,
apparently the distance of our anger,
the beauty of the struggle:
THE BEAUTY OF OUR TOIL
WITH AN ART-WORK OF CREATIVE DEPTH
AFRIKA BEYOND ALIEN HORIZONS ...

Moritso ndi-Mulidzo (Makhunga)

Justice
(Written at the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court)

here
'justice'
is dished out
to those
who can least
afford an attorney
'justice'
South African style
is dished out
within seconds
almost
without thought
and
the accused
— a faceless man
in a million —
looks around
at the white walls
the white prosecutor
the white clerk
of the court
the white magistrate
and the hostile
interpreter
who misinterprets
what he says

here
'justice'
is done
in a typical
South African fashion
and
the accused
is one more cog
in the wheel
of
the system

Kaizer Mabhilidi Nyatsumba

Turning

In flight from its cote, a dove
need not know its own trajectory,
need not trace its movements,
venturing out.

> The shimmer of wings, rustle
> of leaves, the wind crackling
> in the hollows of rocks, in the hollow
> of the afternoon.

Vast emptiness, dim nothingness,
void into which, perhaps, I should
release a globe; hurl into infinite space
a ball. So that I might know,

when it returned, if it filled
my hands differently, weighted
by its experience, heavier
for where it had been.

> The dried leaves crackle underfoot,
> shatter and, crumbling, disappear.
> The sky is gathered, luminous,
> and the rain begins to fall.

The ball returned, unclouded,
innocent of its own itinerary.
Knowing this, yet I trace;
retrace my flight; and turning:

turn again.

Ian Tromp

Pome (or: the key of dreams)

Magritte knew words
the door the wind the bird
the dream that reason
could close the gaping

distance from seeing to meaning.
The bag the bird the table.
Words are monsters
that measure the depths

and gauge the distance
of seeing and seen, assuage
the cold slurred
loss of meaning.

Ian Tromp

Evictions — White City Jabavu August 1986

We heard in the middle of the night
The droning and rumbling of massive war tanks,
Harsh sounds of Hippos and Casspirs.
We spoke in whispers
And kept our ears on the floor.

I peered through the window
And saw figures as huge as Amazon gorillas
Jump off moving war-chariots
Like squadrons of furious wasps
Jetting from their nests to assail an intruder.

They tore down our fence,
Our dog yelped, whined and whimpered.
Terror seized our hearts;
And time ran back
And fetched the ages of the Gestapo.

'VULA ... VULA ... VULA
MAAK OOP DIE DONDERSE DEUR ...
OPEN UP ...'
Broke the silence of the night.

They drove us into one corner with sjamboks,
Grabbed our furniture,
Threw it out the door
And flung us headlong onto it.

We were teargassed, shot and killed,
Cut to ribbons with sjamboks;
They tap-danced on our torsos,
Trampled us in the dust
And drove us to nowhere.

At the break of dawn
The red disc of the sun
Shuddered to see a spectre
Of multitudes of haggard and grey outcasts
Weeping and wailing saying:
'Where do we go from here?'

Molahlehi J. Mutle

Strandveld Crucifixion

A softening mustard dawn
spun from the east —
high and finely misted
above
this half-mad
southeaster wind:
enraged gale lording
at ground level,
come
to pleat the strandveld —
forcing brown shrubbery
down into prayer,
bushed powdered in white
leaning
like sandblasted skeletons
crucified
on the dunes.
And there
a little way over
are two windburnt figures,
fishermen's wives —
struggling
against this gale
under weight of firewood:
their brown hands
knotted
to this strandveld hairdo,
their energy wildly spent
in holding
this
crucified wood of life —
upon their shoulders.

Brandon Broll

Dreams of Tomorrow
Under the apple tree

Under the apple tree, I met you
And was smitten
Under the apple tree, I met you
And was hooked.

Hold no-one in your arms, but me
Desire no-one but me
Close your heart, my darling
To every love but mine.

Under the apple tree, I wanted you
And was wanted too
Under the apple tree, I loved you
And was loved.

My passion is as powerful as death
My love as old as the earth
Burning like a raging fire
With blinding intensity.

Damaria Senne

True Confession

true confession is a torrent
it lies in feelings
and heals like passion

it's seen in the eyes of a baby
heard in the voice of a murderer
and strikes like a heart attack
hell hates heaven for honey
but they all amble
to the lyrics of true confession

Lebogang Maripe

Three Poems for a Sister in Jail

I. Song for Jenny

There's another bomb gone off
But no one flinches any more,
Our brothers are on the border
Fighting someone else's war,
But I've sniffed some kind of mythical glue
Limitations blew apart:

I'm tunnelling under prison floors
With scuttling cockroaches the only wards
Of secrets whispered in detention night.
I slip between the cracks.

I hear the pages of her bible turn —
Mary still a virgin, Jesus dead.
Tomorrow MC squared will still be E
And us inside our jails.

But I've come to the war with plans in my head
For the spirit of the people here has led
The workers and the animals and me —
To come and get you out!

Come through with us into the moon's blue land,
Spread silver on your face and on your hands,
And leave your feet behind, we'll lend you wings
And the voice of an owl to prophesy your call.

II. For Sisters in Jail

Sister —
Let there be no regrets.
If tears must fall in lonely prison nights
Let them be vitriol
That scalds through years
Of convict-polished floors
To open up the pathways of resistance.

Sister-hero —
Do not doubt
That thousands know
That we must fight
To end this fighting.

Sister-woman —
Do not mourn.
Your sacrifice of unborn children
Will not be in vain.

Should wall turn into gelatine
And melt away,
And bars turn into sugar-sticks
In bored jailers' mouths,
Looking out from that small cell
They deem your world
You will see
Our children play
As yours,
Our mothers fight
As you
Our sisters love
As us.

Sister —
Do not doubt that millions say
That we will fight
To end this fighting.

III. Between Two Lovers

Like a kiewiet's wing
his fingers brush my throat
his eyes warm with vintage Meerlust
stroke my lips.

(Behind their jangled key-closed doors
I may not touch her,
fingers meeting soft as wild kapok
against the glass,
breath murdered by the strangling static
of an intercom.
Unsentenced yet
but sentenced not to touch.)

Breast touching chest
we pause —
in the hiatus between our passion
and the future.
I hold my fingers to your smiling warmth
until the graveyard touch of glass is gone

and fiery flamboyants begin to flower.

(Then, when the blazing risen sun
melds all our futures into one,
I will hold her bone-thin body
and warm it with the scent of wild olives
from him
to me
to her
through touch of skin on skin.)

Barbie Schreiner

My Army

I set out to build my army
Nanny, Frederic Douglas and Antonio Maceo
Came forward smiling
Cudjoe, Toussaint L'Overture, Nat Turner
With their cadres
My army
Before I could say aluta
Marcus Garvey was there too
Malcolm X and Soledad brother Jackson
My army! My army! is growing
Josinah and Machel signed up with Mondlane
Steve Biko, Walter Rodney, Colin Rouch
And Abram Tiro in fatigue
My army! My army! My army!
Amilcar Cabral and Tongogara marched forward
Shezi, Mahlangu and Mohapi attended the parade
Who is not in my army?
Let Botha make his guns with gold and diamonds
My crackforce knows no defeat
My army is growing
My army! My army! My army! My army!

Bicca Muntu Maseko

Sisters

When you come back my sisters
Your eyes shining with admonishment
Your accusing fingers
Smoking and embers flying
Only the guilty will hide
From the wrath you bring from mount exile

Look, you ebony soldiers
Women born of the embrace of time and place
The hour has struck
Afrika waits eyes popped
Chest heaving with expectation
For you to pull the sun
From the apex of Mount Kenya
Across the Limpopo
To the navel of the Free State
To reclaim what belongs to your children

A song rises in my throat
My heart beats your war song
My legs quiver in anticipation of a celebratory dance
My arms make to stretch in welcome
Will Lucifer take the heat?
Come Sisters
We wait!

Mabuse A. Letlhage

Baasboy

I scratch my armpit
where my head is.
I grin wide as a gulf
like a proper monkey.

I lie sweet like a honey pot
that is why I am a baasboy
soon to be a baasman
and get my bones with gravy.

Lesego La Rampolokeng

Thoughts of an Exile

This side of the border
in the light of my heart
my lion-self roams:
the wolves flee from me.

Across the border
in the shadow of my soul
my lamb-self slinks:
afraid of the wolves.

Lesego La Rampolokeng

The Law of Injection

I know the law of injection doctor
please wait!
I will do all that is expected of me
I won't trouble you
I will unbelt my trousers
and push them down a little

I said I know the law doctor
and I am not joking
when you push in the injection
I will not stiffen my body
my buttocks will remain relaxed
until you pump in the medicine
and pull out the injection

thereafter I will brush my buttocks
only where you have inserted the injection
to make the medicine spread in me
and cure me
so I know the law doctor
you see
and I am cooperative
but I fear injection
dammit that needle!
But I will come again
I know those girls will get me again

it's because they sleep with anybody
so I can't escape you doc
you will remain my constant companion
I promise you doc
so are you pleased with me?
then cheerio!

Monageng Mogapi
3/12/1987

This Is Not the Time

This is not the time
for leading the Lippizaner horse
of diction clip-clop-clopping
over the coarse sawdust: asses waggling
in the acid brilliance of the
circus ring:

this is the time for straight talking.
The dead are hauled behind fences while
teargas rolls off the steel flanks of behemoths
in our townships. The regular procession
paces itself: the mounted military grinds
blindly past watchers
who are mostly hidden
who are bent over their dead
who call for guns.

Poets who eye
the grass thick as butter in the paddock
horses nuzzling moving easily
in the cool of the morning
who know love's fecund ellipses:

this is not the time.

Glen Fisher

on being a revolutionary

one needs anger for the revolution, they say
anger
to rise, stand up
break free from your chains

but today
i felt like crying
when i heard
about the butchering
in beirut

of our brothers and sisters
the palestinians
women and children
murdered

elsewhere a child
lay face-down
in a pile of bricks

and i feel so helpless
as if i'm only pretending
to be a revolutionary

a coward
a traitor

because all i do
is scream
and fight with words

and i know
it is not enough
because the wind
just blows away my words
and dries my eyes

but then i realize
it is just
a passing feeling
for deep down i know
the revolutionary also cries

Tyrone August
written on 20.9.82 after the israeli attack on the plo in lebanon

one day

i'm going to
pick up
all the commas
and semi-colons
and fullstops
i've ever used

roll them up
with all
the brackets
and hyphens
and colons

and all the
question marks
and inverted commas
and apostrophes

and throw
them all out again
as one
big
exclamation mark

Tyrone August

there are many ways
(after e. brock)

there are many cumbersome ways
to kill a man:

you can shackle him hand and foot
and bring him in chains
from the bowels of a dungeon
to a supreme court and charge him
    to do this properly you require
    a ruling class
    a cock that crows 'rise in court!'
    a cloak of secrecy to dissect
    a sponge
    some vinegar
    and one man to hammer the charges home

or you can simply
make him carry a plank
to the top of a hill
and nail him to it

or if you are not too fussy
you can take a length of electric cord
and generate darkness
by shocking him senseless
    but for this you need
    sound proof interrogation rooms
    electrodes
    blindfolds
    sockets
    plugs
    the protection of the internal security act
    or the protection of the state of emergency
    and buckets of warm water
    to wash away stubborn stains of blood

or better still
dispensing with the tokyo declaration
you may if his asthma allows
spray teargas at him
as if you were spray painting a car
    but then you need
    closed windows
    iron tipped boots

a plague of rats, sell-outs and liars
blankets crawling with lice
a dozen songs of scorn and ridicule
a magistrate
a blind district-surgoen
and a deaf-mute-and-blind
inspector of detainees

well
in an age of skyscrapers
you may dispose of him
by opening a window
for fresh air
all you then require
is a colour or ideology
to separate you
several arms factories
and grave yards

these are
as i began
cumbersome ways
to kill a man
simpler
direct
and much more neat
is to see that he is living
somewhere in the middle
of the festering sore
of poverty
exhausted by hunger
and dehydrated by thirst

like i said
there are many ways
to kill a man . . .

Dikobe waMogale

You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town by Zoë Wicomb
London: Virago Press (1987)

This is Zoë Wicomb's first collection of short stories, in which she vividly reflects on the South African context. Wicomb, born in South Africa in 1948, left the country in 1970 for England, where she presently lectures on Black Literature and Women's Studies at Nottingham. Her commitment to the country of her birth, expressed in these stories, is also evident in her active membership of the Nottingham Anti-Apartheid Movement.

The stories in this collection encode an autobiographical impulse which transcribes the experiences of a young, so-called coloured woman, growing up in Namaqualand, attending the University of the Western Cape, working in Cape Town, leaving South Africa for England, later to return to her home country with a new perspective on personal and social relationships. These relational perceptions, formatively impressed on her writing, are reflected in the protagonist, Frieda Shenton's identity fragmentation over different and changing positions regarding race, class and gender.

As a result of this autobiographical dimension Wicomb's writing partly blends in with the South African black woman's literary tradition. Even though the historical documentary nature of, for example, Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali and Ellen Kuzwayo's writing is not characteristic of Wicomb's work, her narratives are shaped by the relationships and experiences within a specific spatio-temporal moment which reflects on prominent incidents in South African history. However, her skilful creative transformation of this material should prevent critics from marginalizing it as mere historical or cultural documentation. This customary marginalization which is done to the creative writing of black women in South Africa is however often based on the scandalous misreading of the indigenous narrative forms which underpin and inform it.

The protagonist in these stories belies popular stereotyping of woman characters in the roles of mothers, wives or lovers, subservient in their relations to others. Frieda Shenton is observer of and reflector on her position as a black, working class woman in a family, community and society in which her subjective experiences are rooted, but from which she is objectively alienated. Her alienation is justified by her different hierarchical positions: she is a prominent outsider in the family and community as a result of her education and residence in England. This elevates her above her family's restricted scope and her original working class origins. In the community's gender stratification she is not only a woman, but also an unattractive self-conscious one, which does not accord with the community's

conceptions of an advantageous gender position. Some stories in this collection prominently focus on the effect of this socially constructed 'disadvantage', leading to sexist compromises in order to survive in a male dominated society. Apart from this, she is also marginalized in the broader society, by means of racial discrimination. This combination of relations is in complex interaction, generating stories which are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also socially and historically sensitive.

The first story in the collection, 'Bowl like hole' (ironically suggesting that one's loss is another's gain), centres around the unusual occasions when Frieda's childhood mining community comes into contact with Mr Weedon, the white mine manager. From the young child's perspective, the community's, as well as her own mother and father's internalization of the South African racial hierarchy is portrayed in their admiration of the white man. Even though she is still unaware of the true exploitative nature of this relationship, the narrative conveys the signs of and codes for the uncovering of the truth. This first story with its structural irony provides an appropriate exposition for the development of the socio-historical consciousness of the protagonist, who already sees in her mother's 'two great buttocks the opposing worlds she occupie[s]' (p.4) and symbolically takes note of 'Mr Weedon's cigar smoke [which] wrap[s] itself in blue bands around Father's neck' (p.5).

Frieda's adolescent awareness of her sexual position and her failure to meet its requirements as prescribed by society are described in 'When the train comes'. This story opens with a self description related to what is admired by men: 'I am not the kind of girl whom boys look at.' (p.21) At the station, where she and her father await the arrival of the train which will take her to her new private school in Cape Town, she is confronted by a group of boys, which immediately invokes her physical self-consciousness. But to her surprise their resentment is a combination of both her unattractiveness and her 'collaboration' with whites, attending St Mary's School. This confrontation with social and political requirements, represented by the group of boys, provokes, apart from her already negatively formed gender consciousness, a political awareness. Her political confusion and social vulnerability are indicated by her response – she calls her father for support. Eventually, indicating the first signs of a subtle resistance against her milieu, although confused, and a growing independence from her familiar and social affiliations, she defies the leader of the boys by disdainfully, but still childishly, remarking: 'Why you look and kyk gelyk, Am I miskien of gold gemake?' (p.35)

Political awareness, amounting to defiance, is further explored

in 'A Clearing in the Bush' when Frieda, amongst other students from the University, boycotts the Memorial Ceremony for Prime Minister Verwoerd, contrasted against the political naivety of a relative, Tamieta; Frieda's gender consciousness is explored in the title story, 'You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town', though still interlocked with racial questions. Pregnant with the child of Michael, a white man, knowing that marriage is illegal, she has only the option of an illegal abortion, during which she is cornered into lying about her racial identity. The title of this story refers to Michael's impatience about her fears of getting lost in Cape Town on her way to have the abortion done. He insensitively remarks: 'There [. . .] is Table Mountain and there is Devil's Peak and there is Lion's Head, so how in heaven's name could you get lost?' (p.73-4) Ironically the title also suggests the mountains of racist and sexist laws and attitudes in the country, complicating the lives of black women, making it almost impossible not to 'get lost'. This provides the rationale and prepares the flow of the narrative for Frieda's departure to England.

The stories 'Home Sweet Home', 'Behind the Bougainvillea', 'Ash On My Sleeve' and 'A Trip to the Gifberge' deal with Frieda's return to her home country, for which she longed, but where she does not belong any more, where friends and family have become strangers. This spatial confusion accentuates her fragmented identity. In 'Bougainvillea', when she partly overcomes her negative physical self-consciousness and becomes involved in a sexual encounter with a childhood friend. her disillusionment reaches a climax when she finds out that he is a suspected spy.

Some of these stories brilliantly analyse the oppressed status and complex identity of black women in South African society. They deserve a rightful place alongside other stories in anthologies, compilations and literary curricula in the country. The prevalent lack of interest in the collection, however, is somewhat disturbing.

Annemarié van Niekerk