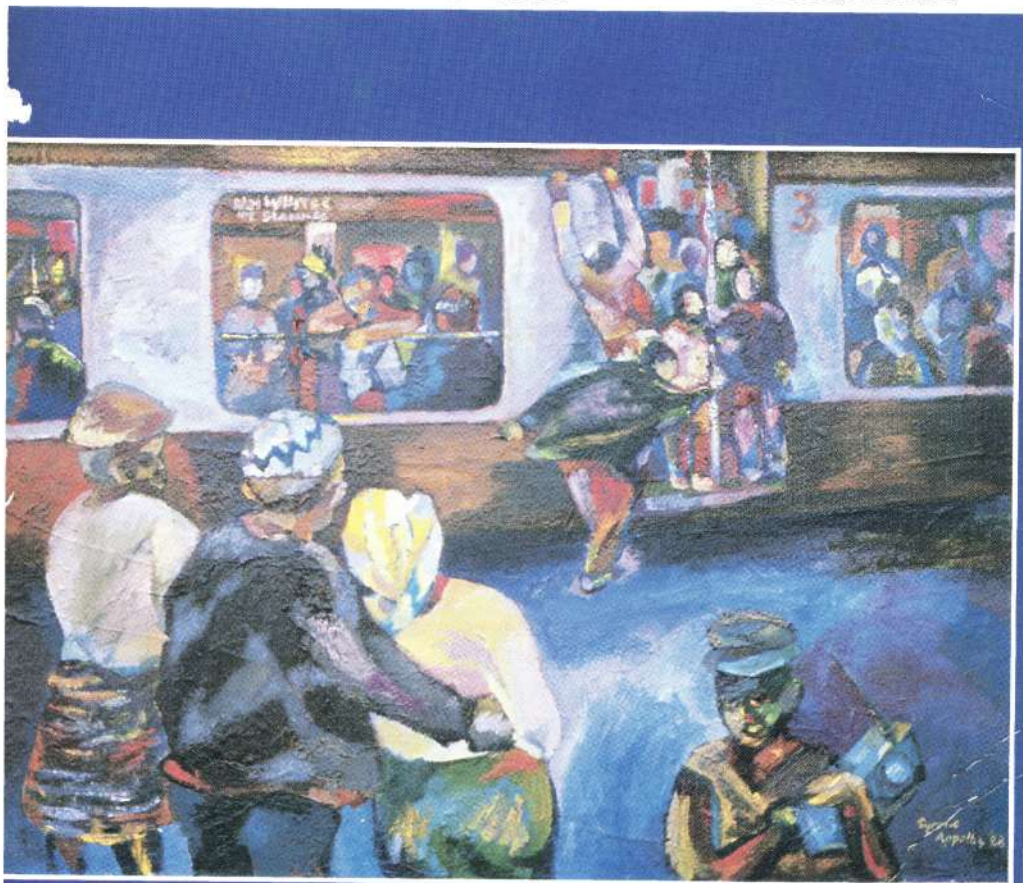


TEN YEARS OF *Staffrider*

1978 - 1988

MAGAZINE



Ten Years of
Staffrider
1978-1988

Edited by
Andries Walter Oliphant
and
Ivan Vladislavić



Ravan Press
Johannesburg

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*For
Mike Kirkwood
and all those
Still Riding*

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Preface

Staffrider magazine, which appeared on the South African cultural scene in March 1978, is ten years old. Although it is not the first magazine to provide a forum for the literary and artistic work from the oppressed communities in South Africa, it is, as Robert Fuller has asserted elsewhere, perhaps one of the most successful cultural journals ever published in this country. This assessment is based not only on the wide readership secured by the magazine, both locally and abroad, although that in itself is important, but also on the significance of the work *Staffrider* has published, the magazine's relationship to political and historical developments in South Africa, and its resilience and adaptability in an extremely hostile and repressive environment.

To mark these achievements this special edition of *Staffrider* brings together some of the finest stories, poems, photographs, graphics, essays and popular history published over the past decade. The issue also carries an essay by Mike Kirkwood, who was instrumental in getting the magazine off the ground, and recent interviews with Chris van Wyk and Njabulo Ndebele, who have both played important roles in the magazine's development. The issue contains a cumulative index of all the work published in the first six volumes (excluding reviews), and this should be of interest both to literary scholars and to the magazine's hundreds of contributors.

The selection process involved collaboration between the current editors and various photographers, artists, poets, prose writers and essayists. As can be expected, it required an in-depth overview of all the work which has appeared in the magazine, and this proved to be an arduous but rewarding exercise. It brought with it an appreciation of the range and quality of the material, on the one hand, and an insight into the intricate relationship between the magazine and the various surrounding ideological perspectives, on the other.

Regarding the range and quality of the work published, the overview disclosed the value of the magazine's non-elitist orientation. *Staffrider* was able to become an outlet for young and often inexperienced writers and to feature the work of community-based projects, inscribed as it was with the imperative to resist officially sanctioned culture and its concomitant aims of domination. The material thus provided a seed-bed for the conceptualisation of a

democratic perspective on culture and its important relationship to the resurgence of the national democratic movement.

The magazine has interacted with all the significant political and historical developments of the past ten years. This interaction is reflected in a diverse range of artistic and literary modes: popular history, performance poetry, social realist fiction, popular music, committed art, documentary photography, and generic hybrids (like the 'proemdra') of a scope, depth and radical orientation not to be found in any other cultural magazine in circulation during the same period.

Staffrider has exerted pressure on the institutionalised notions of writing as well as the rigid demarcations between genres and modes. In so doing it has stimulated debate around questions of the relationship between fiction and documentary reportage, between literature and the other arts, between poetry and politics. It has displayed a willingness to subject itself and its contributors to criticism and to reshape itself according to the demands of the times.

Concerning the magazine's relationship to ideology, the received view has been that the historical circumstances that prevailed at the time of *Staffrider*'s appearance ensured that the ideological perspective of Black Consciousness permeated the editorial policy and therefore the contents of the magazine. This mechanistic view regarded *Staffrider* as a magazine 'by blacks for blacks'. However, while the initial self-editing policy certainly derived from the self-reliance advocated by Black Consciousness, the diversity of contributors during the same period cuts across the entire spectrum of the South African population and unsettles simplistic notions. This flexibility has ensured that the work of previously unpublished writers has appeared alongside that of almost every South African writer of note – Lionel Abrahams, Achmat Dangor, Ahmed Essop, Nadine Gordimer, Douglas Livingstone, Es'kia Mphahlele, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Njabulo Ndebele, Mongane Serote, Miriam Tlali and Rose Zwi, to name but a few.

During the self-editing phase the magazine acted as an outlet for the many cultural groups which sprang up all over the country during the late seventies. Gradually this emphasis was replaced by a more rigorous selection process, coupled with criticism and workshop discussion to improve the overall quality of the work. The magazine also strove to recover and re-insert the writings of earlier generations, and this went a considerable way towards restoring a suppressed tradition of resistance literature in South Africa.

The editors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Paul Weinberg, Omar Badsha and Jeff Lok to this compilation. Weinberg and Badsha, both staunch supporters of the magazine over the years, have played an important

part in the development of documentary photography in South Africa. They are also the organisers of the annual *Staffrider* photographic exhibition. The photographs in this issue were selected from the vast number published in the magazine and from the exhibition archives. Their selection along with the introduction by Joyce Ozynski brings into sharp focus the role played by *Staffrider* in providing a forum for social documentary photography.

Jeff Lok, the designer of the new format *Staffrider*, assisted with the selection of the visual material. He designed this issue, co-ordinated its production and assisted in a range of other areas. In the past *Staffrider* has carried the work of artists such as Thami Mnyele, Gérard Sekoto, Paul Stopforth, William Kentridge and Bongiwe Dhlomo. Mzwakhe Nhlabatsi, a former designer of the magazine, also made a notable contribution. In the years ahead we hope that even more attention will be paid to the visual arts in *Staffrider*.

In conclusion, we have to acknowledge that the place *Staffrider* has secured for itself in South African culture would not have been possible without the vision and support of its contributors, readers and production staff. The generous financial support extended by various institutions to the publishing projects of Ravan Press is also gratefully acknowledged. Without this support a venture like *Staffrider* would not have been possible in a context where progressive publishing is a perilous enterprise.

A.W. Oliphant
Ivan Vladislavić
Johannesburg, September 1988

About Staffrider

A staffrider is, let's face it, a *skelm* of sorts. Like Hermes or Mercury — the messenger of the gods in classical mythology — he is almost certainly as light-fingered as he is fleet-footed. A skilful entertainer, a bringer of messages, a useful person but...slightly disreputable. Our censors may not like him, but they should consider putting up with him. A whole new literature is knocking at the door, and if our society is to change without falling apart it needs all the messages it can get — the bad as well as the good.

Like him or not, he is part of the present phase of our common history, riding 'staff' on the fast and dangerous trains of our late seventies. He is part of the idiom of this time.

The magazine which bears his name has been established by Ravan Press in an attempt to respond, as publishers, to the great surge of creative activity which has been one of the more hopeful signs of recent times.

The new writing has altered the scope and function of literature in South Africa in ways we have still to discover. The aim of this magazine is not to impose 'standards' but to provide a regular meeting place for the new writers and their readers, a forum which will help to shape the future of our literature.

A feature of much of the new writing is its 'direct line' to the community in which the writer lives. This is a two-way line. The writer is attempting to voice the community's experience ('This is how it is') and his immediate audience is the community ('Am I right?') Community drama, 'say' poetry, an oral literature backed and often inspired by music: this is the heart of the new writing, and the signs are that prose forms are re-emerging in a new mould.

It is for this reason that the work appearing in *Staffrider* flies the flag of its community. We know that there are many groups of writers in Southern Africa whom we haven't been able to reach, and we would welcome their contributions. We hope that the work appearing in the magazine will be selected and edited as far as possible by the groups themselves. The magazine is prepared for publication by Ravan Press but has no editor or editorial board in the usual sense.

This is our policy: to encourage and give strength to a new literature based on communities, and to establish important lines of communication

between these writers, their communities, and the general public. At the same time we welcome writers who write and publish essentially as 'unattached' individuals, yet find the *Staffrider* environment congenial.

The first Editorial, Volume 1 Number 1, 1978

Staffrider

Ah, *Staffrider*, you are 'a skelm of sorts',
That's how one muse set you in print,
There to be a harbinger of feelings and thoughts,
A vehicle to convey riches from the scribes' mint.

But who are you to be so named
And issue from this world so rough!
That turns off oldies, makes you ill-famed
As they see you danger ride? You are tough

I must admit, your feet nimble and crafty
Dangling on vehicles moving with speeds like light,
You dart on and off in a manner so jaunty
It sends a chill — and yet, oh what a sight!

That muse has given you an honour
In a deed that has artistry as intent
Translating your dextrous touch and valour
To works that give vision essential content.

In this your new-found platform,
That has gained you goodly notice
From those whose minds you must form
And whose hearts fill with creative justice,

Continue: if you change an iota of human granite
Into the soil that sprouts liberty's food
You'll have more value than all the dynamite
That blasts rocks for the financier's good.

Meshack Mabogoane

REMEMBERING STAFFRIDER

Mike Kirkwood

I like to think that *Staffrider*, whatever it may have accomplished, suggested somewhat more. I like to think that it created or confirmed expectations yet to be delivered on, in the pages of the magazine or anywhere else. I remember a day when I thought I'd glimpsed (and maybe I had) a moment (the kind you could never walk in on except by accident) in the unfolding of such hopes. It was mid winter, 1978, and the third issue of the magazine had just been published (Matshoba's 'Call Me Not a Man' was in it). I was walking east along De Korte Street in Braamfontein, away from the Ravan Press offices which in those days overlooked the De Korte/Bertha corner. The AA has its offices there now, and probably even lists among its members some of those who ten years ago were 'riding staff'.

De Korte Street was crowded: lunchtime for some, lunchbreak for others. Outside a small, church-owned bookshop something was impeding the flow of pedestrians. People were stepping into the street to get past; others were turning their heads to look as they edged by. My guess was that a 'game' of Three Cards was in progress, and as I approached I could see that a group of men in workclothes were squatting on the pavement. At any moment I expected to see the 'lucky winner' peel off from the group holding a fistful of ten rand notes. But no, these men had 'halves' of bread in their hands and a carton of *magewu* was doing the rounds. Oblivious of the passers-by, they were engaged in the most animated of conversations. It was this quality in the tableau – the unusual combination of relaxation and intensity, shutting out the mundane, desultory tension of South African urban life – that was drawing the involuntary attention of the passing crowd.

Aha! My heart upped a beat. Centrally displayed in this bookshop window (if nowhere to be seen in the 'mass market' CNA a block away) was a copy of *Staffrider*. The gestures of the men made it clear that this, and nothing else, was the topic of their conversation. My thoughts raced. Here were, not impossibly, home boys of the central figure in 'Call Me Not a Man'. The story had presented him as the archetypal victim of a casual, venal cruelty, a weary, repetitive sadism. Behind the licensed thugs who had dealt out his humiliation stood a society based on the exploitation of, above all others, the migrant underclass whose representative he was.

The story turns on the presence in it of another figure, that of a new kind of storyteller. Matshoba gives him a collective voice, inserts him inside the consciousness of a community as an anonymous presence who can speak for

all, for 'we'. Also, he gives him a role, that of the bystander whose political fuse is shorter than most people's: not by much, or he would lose his anonymity and with it his representativeness, but critically closer to the dynamite in the crowd around him, nevertheless, or he wouldn't have a role. He and a friend (such a friend is another important recurring figure in Matshoba's stories) are witnessing the beating of the man from a typical vantage point in the *Staffrider* landscape, an overhead bridge between station platforms. When they direct their anger at the policemen down below, the anger of the crowd is simultaneously ignited.

A further moment in this chain reaction seemed to be unfolding before my eyes. One of the men, I decided, had read the story. Now he was telling his friends about this new magazine in which it had appeared. The writer and his medium were standing in, in the wider society, for the watchers on the bridge. 'Hey,' I said, squatting down in this first circle of the new culture, 'do you guys like the magazine?'

The man looked at me with that tolerant mixture of amusement and incomprehension that you will still find, I hope, here and there on the sidewalks. They didn't offer to share their lunch with me, it's true, and they showed no sign of answering my question in any direct fashion, but on the other hand they didn't tell me to shove off either, nor did they get up and walk away. They looked at me, at the magazine, at each other. They talked the situation over a bit (but not in English), and then there was a spokesman. I knew who it was because he looked at me in this level way for about thirty seconds. Then he jabbed a finger very decisively at the *Staffrider* in the shop window. 'That's our station,' he said, with some finality. Our conversation, too, had reached its destination. On the cover of that issue we had published an anonymous, atmospheric photograph of a deep Soweto station — Naledi, I think it was.

Telling the story now can only remind me of the dangerous populist fantasies that ran in our heads when the magazine first came out. The first issue took its cue from the late Ralph Ndawo's unforgettable picture of a young boy in mid-air, poised to land on the freedom side of a high security fence. All that repressive perimeter grey, and glinting silver mesh, and too much sunlight troubling the lens. The air crackling and electric, full of 'stray bullet' menace. But it's all behind him, the boy is leaping clear. Actually, he is almost flying. His legs are cycling on air, like a long jumper's. You can see from this — and from the knowing, judging way his head is cocked — that he will land on his feet. In the midst of some desperate, encircling adventure, he has stayed cool enough to be a small boy doing what he can do well, the daring jump from a height. Somewhere in the future that he is running to, Njabulo

S. Ndebele's story, 'The Test', is waiting for him. And so is the 'civil war' of the period after September 1984.

The magazine wasn't there yet, either. Our first leap was premised on volatile, unstable assumptions about the legacy of 1976, the new terrain into which the boy was leaping. The cultural perimeters of apartheid had been breached, though in the months before the magazine was launched the state was trying to seal off the threat. Many of the 18 organisations banned in October 1977 had cultural programmes, and the directors of Ravan Press and the South African Committee for Higher Education were among the individuals banned at that time. From this point on, though, it would always be the case that the fistful of repression contained a pinch of reform. The period of the Wiehahn and Riekert Commissions also brought changes in the censorship system which *Staffrider* would profit from, surviving its early string of bannings without making any concessions on what it chose to publish. Embroiled in the Info scandal (essentially a contest within the state about the nature and control of the 'repressive reform' apparatus) the regime had to concede to opposition groups the space in which to regroup and mobilise. *Staffrider* hung out its pennant over this space. Quite quickly, as political and labour organisations established themselves and developed cultural programmes with clearer ideological positions, it lost the special significance it held for a while (at its height, the print run touched 10 000 copies). Soon enough, it became a relic, something that reminded its readers and contributors (many of them now engaged in organised forms of struggle) of a particular stretch of the road behind them.

To one group of people, perhaps, it remains more than a museum piece. The oddest thing about *Staffrider* was always this: that it was a *literary* magazine. Yet it was. Of course, one could turn this statement around and say that the odd thing about most of its contributors was that they were *writers*. Yet they were. It happened, at that time in South Africa, that literature became overburdened with a number of other social and political functions. While only a narrow view of literature would exclude these functions from among those literature can perform, it is true that existing literary forms must undergo a considerable development before they begin to be adequate to these 'new' functions (often discovered to be not so new in this very process of formal development because the writer, in his constant search for 'models' in the past, discovers old forms which once served comparable functions: consider the case of the South African writer who tries to find written equivalents for some of the techniques of oral literature). By the same token, it happened that an unusual number of people found they could best participate in the making of a new society, or best pursue their more personal aspirations, by *writing*. If

the great majority of these are no longer 'riding' (as we used to say then) there remain some significant talents who have not yet reached their 'stop station'. There are those, too, who were writers before the deluge, and are writers after it. For many of them the '*Staffrider* period' gave rise to mixed feelings. On the one hand there was the plus of a considerably enlarged circle of readers and, maybe, the ambience the magazine created. On the other hand, the ambience sometimes seemed to impose a 'Tower of Babel' effect: in a plethora of voices, who would hear the nuanced 'real stuff' one was trying to write? And finally, perhaps, there are writers who have come through in the years when *Staffrider* has clearly required a refit, and yet no alternative has come to the fore. If *Staffrider* does not belong in the bizarre museum of South African history, it is writers – fewer in number now that other roles have become available to the cultural activist – who will say so.

It used to be suggested, in the pages of *Staffrider*, that a writer was in some sense the voice of a distinct community, which thus 'spoke' to other communities via the network of those interlocutors and their readers. Banners appeared over bundles of poems and stories, ascribing the milieus of Sebokeng, Katlehong, Mamelodi, etc. to the work presented. Often enough the writers syndicalised in this way had indeed formed themselves into groups. As often, the universal application of this layout principle conferred 'community' on writers living in a state of blissful anomie. Our failure to think this issue through, or rationalise it as a proper operating principle, was the clearest indication of our populist tendency. In the end, as the groups withered away, we simply dropped a rubric which had always been somewhat symbolic.

Of what? Thinking back on it, I am waylaid by a number of questions that won't go away, and which the new *Staffrider* may be in a position to tackle more cogently. In what ways were those groups representative of the communities in which they arose? What if, as overt political organisation becomes increasingly difficult under present conditions, cultural groups again come to the fore? This time they will have been formed under rather different auspices. Their representative credentials will be more widely respected. Writers, and 'cultural workers' more generally, will have a clearer sense of duty, of 'authorisation' – and I believe that the pun does take us to the heart of the matter. For this will only raise the aesthetic side of the question more clearly. It is difficult to create powerfully out of a sense of duty, a sense of being empowered so to do. Indeed, who can authorise an author?

One is reminded of Isaac Babel's speech to the Soviet Union's first Writers' Congress in 1934. He pointed out that no one could fault the treatment of writers by the Party and the state. They had been granted generous material support

and had lost only one freedom, 'the right to write badly'. 'Comrades, let us not fool ourselves: this is a very important right, and to take it away from us is no small thing.' What makes Babel *the* authority on this subject, among twentieth century writers, is not simply the wonderful succinctness of that statement, or the fact that his speech was a prelude to arrest and death in a concentration camp. What further qualifies him is his own work, those stories in the *Red Cavalry* collection which demonstrate the possibility of writing from within a revolutionary community without becoming a party hack. The challenge, it seems, is to develop a relationship between writer and community such that the writer's 'we' is authenticated by other processes than those deriving from the political framework within which, nevertheless, the writer and the community first recognise each other.

A more practical consideration – though one not without ideological implications – governed the emphasis on community in the early *Staffrider*. My only experience of publishing before 1978 had been gained on the campus of the University of Natal in Durban. I was one of the editors of *Bolt*, a definitively 'little magazine' which Ian Glenn had started and Christopher Hope ran for a time. When not in other hands the magazine routinely devolved on Tony Morphet and me. Once the subscriber copies had been mailed, the prospect of distributing the remaining copies was always a daunting one. Forced sales, on the refuse-me-if-you-can principle, to colleagues in the Arts and Social Sciences departments was the usual solution. But doors had started to bang as I approached, and we can all take only so much humiliation. Then one day we had a letter from Nkathazo Mnyayiza, some of whose early poems had appeared in *Bolt*. He wanted fifty copies to sell in Mpumalanga, Hammarsdale, where he lived. Fifty! What was more, a week or so later he sent us a postal order for this first batch and ordered another fifty. One hundred copies was twenty percent of our print run. This was the first indication I had that something approaching a writing/reading revolution was under way.

Mpumalanga Arts wasn't the only writers' group in the country, I discovered. Mthobi Mutloatse, the one person without whom there would have been no *Staffrider*, was in touch with a good many more and there was every indication that a network could not only be developed but very widely extended. Informal selling through the groups, we decided, could provide a circulation as effective as the centralised marketing operation of the CNA chain, which at that time was beyond our reach. Bypassing the anonymity of the shops would also provide organisational advantages, something summarised for me by the sight of a Sowetan *Staffrider* seller whose street call was 'Knowledge!' The rise and fall of this distribution system is a long story.

Two lessons, in particular, might be learned from it. The first is that it depends on a more durable infrastructure of cultural groups than we had at that time: something that might well be more available ten years on. The second is that distribution is a special skill; as important as the group is the presence of a specialist 'spreader' within its ranks (and within the publishing house, for that matter). It is instructive that what remained after informal distribution had run down (and the magazine, ironically, had become largely dependent on the CNA outlets) was a handful of people, without group identification, who were able to part with a hundred copies or so (each) on a 'business' basis. If cultural groups are 'coming out' again, each one should contain a specialist distributor to handle publications, tapes, T-shirts etc., on the basis of discounts generous enough to amount to a living wage, or at least a good part-time income.

Many a *Staffrider* story has begun as 'something that happened the other day' or 'a thing someone told me on the train'. If this begins to demonstrate the sense in which the community can speak through the South African writer (who at the same time may hope to leave the unmistakable print of his or her skill on the material 'passed on'), there are other ways in which this can happen. Perhaps these require lesser skills than the 'authorial' variety, but these don't seem to me to be incompatible with the author's function: indeed, they could be seen as an important part of an aspirant writer's apprenticeship. One of these ways is the recorded interview in which the life story of a member of the community is elicited. Miriam Tlali's 'Soweto Speaking' interviews in the early issues of *Staffrider* demonstrated the potential of this form, but I don't think it has ever been mined at 'deep level'. A number of long, searching interviews, and careful editing, are needed to bring out the shape of a single life in a way that will reveal, simultaneously, the bedrock of the community's experience and the sometimes tortuous seam of one person's journey. Perhaps this work is best conducted in association with an academic body (such as the African Studies Institute) with experience and expertise in the field. The writer-as-recorder, working from inside the community and thus able to identify interesting subjects, can certainly offer an equal exchange.

Episodes can be as fruitful as whole lives: there is scope here for a more precise genre than has so far been defined in the 'oral life story' field, and one that might deliver more immediate results if, as suggested above, the full-length life story is necessarily a matter of time and patience. These episodes might be events that happened fifty years ago or yesterday (and there is scope for juxtaposing two such experiences when they are linked by some common theme); it is by no means necessary that they should recall events of obvious

significance, and it would add relish to mingle the everyday with the world-historical.

Inevitably, and aptly, the life story approach led *Staffrider* into the field of popular history. I often think that the most significant cultural development in South Africa over the last two decades or so has been the recovery of our history – in two main respects. One is the decolonisation of the material, a matter of prising history from the death grip of the rulers, opening the mass tomb of the victims, discovering the persistent catacombs of the sturdy resisters, rewriting history ‘from below’. The other is the infusion, like a hurricane’s breath sweeping through tunnelled subterranean strata, of the continuity that links us with the almost simultaneous events in 1912-13 that exiled a people and embarked us on the great trek to freedom; or with the discovery of gold and the great migration into wage labour; or with the dilemmas of Moshesh, Makana and Shaka, or with our own Rip van Winkle who fell asleep on a mossy banknote after writing ‘I promise to pay . . .’ We needn’t dress this up in rhetoric. I think of Willie Moshidi, with whom I once talked about the trees that grow in the Magaliesberg. We were looking at a photograph of the ‘Transvaal sour plum’, as I knew it. ‘That’s my tree,’ said Willie. ‘What do you mean, that’s your tree?’ ‘Moshidi. That tree is *moshidi*.’ Or the driver of a delivery van who, like many another, got involved with the Ravan book display while waiting for a signature on his consignment note. The book that really grabbed him was Philip Bonner’s *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires*, the standard ‘revisionist’ text on nineteenth century Swaziland. It cost fifteen rands or so, but he didn’t hesitate. In fact, he went out to the van and brought his friend in. This man bought a copy of Peter Delius’s *The Land Belongs to Us*, the work which did for Pedi history what Bonner’s had done for its Swazi counterpart.

A few weeks later the delivery man was back, and I had a chance to ask him about his interest in history. He showed me his copy, the text now underlined wherever the Kunenes came into the story. What preoccupied him was the dispersal of his ancestors into various parts of Southern Africa over the last 150 years or so, under the varying impacts of colonial conquest and occupation, migrant labour, pass laws, forced removals, and so on. His interest lay simply in reconstructing, as completely as possible given the attrition of time, the whereabouts of anyone with whom he could claim kinship. Whatever the political implications of his search (the question of ethnicity – condemned to the status of a taboo subject by the regime’s *de facto* monopolisation of the right to decide, and sometimes to invent, each person’s racial, tribal or ‘national’ identity – has long stood in need of revaluation from a progressive

standpoint), what impressed me about his interest in history was the practical, everyday orientation which allowed him to talk about century old events as if they had happened yesterday, and happened to *him*. As a driver for a big company, he travelled around the country a lot. It helped him, in all matters associated with the concept of hospitality, to know where his nearest relative could be found. His search was a branch of 'people's history', a subject that is no longer short of advocates and programmes. In this field, as in others, I think *Staffrider* can aim to play a supportive, universalising role. It can be one of the places in which information about activities and projects can be found, and a vehicle for sharing the subject with general readers (who will sometimes turn out to be pursuing historical enquiries of their own).

The life experiences of organised South African workers have from time to time held a special place in the pages of the magazine (often under revealingly trite banners such as 'Staffworker' – the outcome of attempts to integrate working class material within a predominantly populist milieu). Now institutional forms such as 'cultural locals' within the organised working class have laid the foundations of a distinct and unique literature. The challenge to *Staffrider*, I would think, is to discover (in collaboration with the cultural activists of the working class) the format which would enable the magazine to play its part in integrating this development within the new national culture as a whole. This raises some intriguing questions, not least because 'working class literature' is already distinctly 'national' in terms of the immensely creative way in which it has 'remade' traditional forms such as the praise poem. Instead of addressing these questions, I am going to circle them by means of an anecdote which will allow me to bring this exercise in selective memory to a close.

I once helped out on a worker newspaper, and one of my assignments was to interview some people who had participated in a strike. It soon became clear that one person in the group, an old man, would do most of the talking. I had prepared a list of questions designed to lay bare the dynamic of this affair and relate it to the typology of such conflicts, of which I was then an eager if somewhat inexperienced student. To the first of these questions the old man embarked on a long reply which began by outlining the circumstances under which he had been hired by the firm. I listened, not very well. The tape recorder whispered quietly on the table between us. Whenever he paused I inserted another question, trying to find one which seemed likely to switch him on to the right track. After this had gone on for a bit he stopped and looked at me in a way which made it difficult to think of any questions at all. Then he started again. It struck me that the sentences he used, and certain favoured expres-

sions, were recapitulating exactly what he had said before. The difference was that now it was all making sense. You could say that he had me under his spell.

Many South Africans with a story to tell also have a notion in their heads about how it should be told. Can it be that the importance of this fact for our literature in prose is so obvious that we refuse to theorise it? At any rate, it strikes me as strange that, at a time when such an emphasis is being placed on the collection of oral testimony, we have not made any attempt to locate and record people with some fame *as storytellers*. It is this inexplicable omission that *Staffrider* may be in a unique position to rectify.

Much of what I have written here seems to have suggested that *Staffrider's* early attempt to be a mouthpiece through which whole communities could speak to each other has been outflanked by more specific and deeply rooted cultural developments which the magazine should now seek to reflect and support, from the particular standpoint of the writer qua writer. Storytelling may serve as one example of the way in which the broader cultural agenda can be focused within the practice of the writer. In recent years the magazine has drawn attention to the story (not, be it noted, the 'short story', a poor cousin of the novel) as a literary form of major and underestimated significance, particularly in non-Western societies (though even in the West the postmodernist avant garde is beginning to include storytelling among its key aesthetic categories). The opportunity of providing a setting in which the story teller and the story writer come face to face is one that should not be missed.

Note

Despite its anecdotal tendencies, this article was not written as an attempt to set down the history of *Staffrider*, or of my part in it. For the record it should be stated that, from its earliest days, a great many people have contributed generous amounts of time and energy to the magazine, and left their various marks (including those made, invisibly, with a blue pencil) on its pages. They know who they are. It should also be recorded that my own contribution was occasional and marginal after the first year or so. This was because of the pressure of other publishing duties, and not by any means a sign of waning interest. If this remembrance appeared under a pen-name, it would be 'Still Riding'.

Stories

Staffrider
Vol. 1 No. 1 March 1978

Staffrider
Vol. 7 No. 3 May/June 1988

What's Cooking?

Staffrider
Vol. 1 No. 3 July/August 1978

Staffrider
Vol. 7 No. 4 September/October 1988

Riding Staff this issue.

Marshall, Michael, Tim, Dave, Stephen, David
Philip, Mike, Andrew, Colin, James, Frank
Henry, C.A., Peter, Christopher, Paul, Mike, Adam
& Michael, Sam, Steve, Iain, Gordon and many more...

My Friend, the Outcast

Mtutuzeli Matshoba

*Woe to them who devise wrong,
And work out wickedness upon their beds.
In the morning light they do it,
Because it is in their power.
They covet fields and seize them,
And houses, and carry them off.*

His name is Vusi. For his whole life he has lived with us at our location. I have known him ever since I started to notice that there were other people in the world besides those whom I saw at home. We made trains with mealie cobs together when we were small; we hunted the delicious wild rats and little birds of the highveld on the mining land where we were not allowed, together; we learnt to swim in the Klip rivulet together when it had rained and the water was deep enough; we went to old, and now gone, Harlem cinema next to Faraday station together; we learnt to smoke and to lie in wait for the little girls at the shops together; we played 'chailence' soccer with a tennis ball against the boys from the other streets together. He quit school first and sold apples and sweets on the trains while I went to school, but we were together at all other times. Ah, there are countless other things that we did together, and if I counted them I would never get to telling you about what happened the other day.

Roughly, here is the story of my friend. Mind you, I was not there when it all started to happen, but I can just imagine what took place; what with such things being part of life for us darkies. We read about them in the papers, we hear about them every other day, we come across the people who bring them about, who cause our friends pain and sorrow, many times in our lives. But when you read about it or hear about it, it is never as real as when it happens to someone who is close to you.

Last month on a Wednesday morning, when the eastern horizon was beginning to be etched out against the grey light cast by the first rays of a young day, there was a loud knock, that rattled the dishes in the cupboard and vibrated the window panes in their frames, at the front door of Vusi's home. Vusi's mind was

wrenched painfully from the depths of slumber. At first he thought that he had just woken from a terrible nightmare in which ghouls had converged upon the house screaming for his blood. When he recovered from the shock, he realised that it was the unmistakable knock of the police that had jolted him from sleep. While he reached for his trousers on the small bench near the bed, he tried to remember what he had done wrong. 'A guy's mere existence is a crime in this cursed world. You break the law without being aware of it, no matter how you try not to,' he thought.

'Vula, open up, or we break in!' a furiously impatient voice with a Xhosa accent shouted from outside, followed by another nerve-wrecking knock.

From the other bedroom Vusi's mother's tremulous voice sailed. 'Who is it, Vusi?'

'It's the blackjacks, ma. I wonder what they want,' answered Vusi, having peeped through a slit in the curtains to see. He felt a slight relief: Usually the WRAB police did not mean serious trouble.

'Let them in quickly, my child,' Vusi's mother said, and to herself she muttered, '*Thixo wami*. At this time of the night! It must be something bad. But we've been paying the rent. Let me rise and see what they want.'

'Okay, I'm coming. Stop knocking like we were deaf,' Vusi said exasperatedly as he went to open. Dikeledi's eyes shone in the semi-darkness. She smothered the cries of their baby, who had been woken by the rude knocking, with her breast. The other baby, two-year-old Nontsizi, was whimpering with fright on the floor beside the bed. Temba, the little boy who had come with Dikeledi from the dusty streets and was now calling Vusi *baba*, slept soundly next to his sister. In the other room on the sagging sofa, Muntu was sleeping off the last dregs of the *skokiaan* he drank every day, snoring like a lawnmower. Vusi felt an urge to kick him in the ribs. He knew, however, that he could never bring himself to do it, in spite of the revulsion he felt towards anyone who drank excessively; Muntu was his brother, moreover his elder brother.

He switched the light on and the big bulb flooded the room with a glare that sent the cockroaches scampering for cover. They made the grimy walls look more grimy and Vusi felt ashamed that he was about to let strangers into such a house. It was slightly better when Dikeledi had spruced it up. The insects were a nuisance as well as part of the family, having always been there, surviving all the insecticides on the market.

He unlocked the door and heaved. There was a screech that set

everybody's teeth on edge as it swung open, and in strutted three 'blackies'. Recently their uniform had been changed from a depressing pitch black over a khaki shirt and tie into another dull colour that only a painter can name for you.

'Where's the owner of the house?' asked the first one in a gruff voice. He had a bushy moustache, puffed cheeks, and an air of importance.

The others did not want to be left out of the fun. 'Are you the *mnumzane*, you? Ha, ha, haw,' the fat one with an oily face and a neck like an accordion said. They had not even removed their caps.

'No. This is not my house. There's the old lady. She's in bed,' Vusi answered, ignoring the goading.

'We want the father of the house, maan. And we haven't got forever, too,' the third one butted in, not to be left out either.

'There's no father. Only the old lady. The old man is late.' Vusi felt a tightening in his chest as he remembered how many years ago they had been told without really grasping what was meant, that their father had committed suicide by hanging himself from the rafters of his bedroom with a thin wire, leaving them to face a merciless life which had defeated him, a man, alone with their mother. He had always asked himself what had made his old man, whom he could only remember very faintly, decide that the only way out of hardship was death.

'Wake your mother boy. There's nothing we can talk to a *tsotsi*,' the one who had come in first said, with the smirk of a coward who had got a chance to push someone else around.

Vusi's mother appeared from behind a tattered curtain which was meant to give a little privacy to her bedroom. All seventy-five years of her, woken up unceremoniously at ungodly hours.

'Hawu, my children, what has made you pay us a visit at this early hour?' she asked slowly, in the manner of the ancient.

The dignity of old age overcame some of the visitors' braggadocio. 'It is *abakhulu* who have sent us, *magogo*. Are you the registered tenant of this house?' Bushy Moustache asked. He had pulled out a battered chair and seated himself while the others remained standing. Muntu continued to snore.

'Yes child, but he pays the rent,' she replied, pointing to Vusi.

'He pays it under your name. Don't he?'

The old woman nodded.

'It's you that's wanted then. Come with us to the office.'

'Is it trouble, my children?'

'We don't know. Our duty was just to bring the owner of the house in. *Asazi*, you'll hear from the big ones,' the fat one said and moved towards the door. His behind reminded Vusi of an ox.

That morning they took the old woman away for an interview with the superintendent at Uncle Tom's Hall. Vusi wanted to go along but the 'blackies' would not allow him in the van. Dikeledi persuaded him to go to work: everything would be alright, they had never failed to pay the rent on time. He had a bad day at work.

It was not until about four hours later, at nine, that the white staff started showing up. There were three of them, the superintendent and his two assistants. As soon as their cars came into sight, the blackjacks who had seen them first rushed forward and waited to open the doors for their gods. One even went so far as to carry a briefcase inside the building for the white man who arrived last, trotting behind the latter like a schoolchild who had beaten others in the race to aid the principal with his case. Those who had been caught unawares appeared to begrudge the others their alertness. Two of the new arrivals wore shorts which seemed too big for their thin dry legs.

It took the superintendents another hour of browsing through their morning papers to assure themselves that they were the masters of the fates of hundreds of thousands, before they could really get started with their work. With single strokes of their pens they decided the comfort and discomfort of the people who came before them.

The old man who had been called in ahead of Vusi's mother came out with his passbook, the old folding *dompas* type, held in front of his eyes, squinting and tilting his head to read whatever he was trying to make out in it. He stood there shaking his head dejectedly, his shoulders drooped, unlike when he had been called in. There was no doubt that he had received a stroke of grief.

The interpreter-clerk-aid stood at the door and shouted at the top of his voice, 'Mrs Nyembezi!' The frail old woman tottered painfully from where she had been sitting. It took her some time to reach the door and in the meantime the clerk coaxed her dryly: 'C'mon, c'mon, *magogo*, *phangisa*. *Umlungu* will not wait for you. We are working here!'

'*Awu*, my child, the years have passed. The bones have gone weak, child of my child,' apologised Mrs Nyembezi with a wrinkled smile. She tried to quicken her step but all she did was give herself fiery pangs in her joints.

At last she was sitting on the bench before one of the superintendents, a middle-aged man with a beaky nose, thin downturned lips, a pale pinkish, leathery, veined complexion and impersonal grey eyes. He kept toying with his pen on the blotter while his underscrapper buzzed around arranging the house files and the rubber stamps on the desk so that his lordship could reach them without straining himself.

'*Ja, ouma. Wat kan ek doen vir jou?*' The thin lips barely vibrated. He asked this absent-mindedly, opening the file.

Mrs Nyembezi tried her best to comprehend what was said, although she knew that she understood scarcely one word of Afrikaans or any other white man's language. She looked from the man to the clerk. 'My child, please come and help me here. I can't understand a single word of what he says,' she pleaded.

'*Jong!* You can't even speak Afrikaans?' the white man went on in the same language. He sounded as if he regarded it as a grave sin for the poor granny not to be able to speak his tongue.

He looked up from the papers into the old eyes. His face was expressionless. Again he studied the file. 'Tsk, tsk, tsk . . .' He shook his head.

'Why don't you pay rent, *jong?*' And the clerk translated.

'But . . . but, my child, I pay. I've never missed paying. We'd rather go with empty stomachs at home than fail to pay. And I keep all the receipts. I could bring them to prove that there is not one month in all the years that we lived in the house that we did not pay,' Mrs Nyembezi explained, wringing her shrivelled hands weakly. 'There must be a mistake somewhere, *bantu bami.*'

The clerk interpreted.

'You want to say I'm lying *ouma?* It says here you are in arrears to the amount of one hundred rand with your rent, *maan!*'

The sudden outburst made Mrs Nyembezi cower, frightened even more. '*Nkulunkulu*, the white man is so angry. What shall I say to him?' And aloud, 'Please child of my child, ask *nkosi* not to send me to jail.'

The clerk looked exasperated. 'No one is sending you to jail, *magogo*. *Umlungu* says you owe rent. You know you owe, so I don't see why you're making such a fuss about it.'

'But I don't owe anything. Honestly, I paid. Where could I get the receipts if I did not pay? Ask him my child, ask him.'

'So you think you're smart about the receipts, huh? Didn't your children steal them when they burnt down the offices? And if you bring them, against what do you think we are going to check the

black power period and that which comes before it? We don't have the records. Your own children destroyed them with fire. Moreover who do you think has the time to check your stupid record of payment? Get this straight, *ouma*. First you should teach your children not to burn down things that have been built for you people out of our taxes and, secondly, I want that money paid — are you working?' A ridiculous question.

'No *nkosi*. My son works. I receive old age pension.' The old woman's distress was audible in her undulating voice, which trailed off hopelessly.

'How much does that son of yours earn, and how much is your pension?' the superintendent demanded.

'I don't know how much he earns but I receive thirty rands every alternate month.'

'I don't see what beats you in paying your rent when you've got income. Or perhaps you drink it in shebeens? Tell your son to stop drinking and help you with your rent — understand?'

She nodded because there was nothing else to say. The white man was really angry.

'I want that money paid as quickly as possible. Otherwise you go back to the bantustan you came from and your son gets a room in a hostel; and somebody who is prepared to pay his rent gets the house. There are thousands on the waiting list. Now go. I don't want to see you here again. You're lucky I don't throw you out immediately. Say thanks I don't,' the superintendent said and clamped his thin lips.

'Thank you very much, *nkosi*. We'll raise the money and pay.'

It was like saying she would get a duck and make it lay eggs of gold for her.

During the first month after the interview, the going was tougher at Vusi's home. They had to sacrifice some of their basic needs which in the circumstances acquired luxury status. Protein was one thing they could not afford at all, the little ones having to make do only with sour porridge, and when the smallest baby got sick Dikeledi had to stay away from work to take her on day-long visits to the babies' clinic at Orlando, seeing that she could not spare five rand for a quick visit to the private doctor. No one whined. Dikeledi did not ride Vusi about money, careful not to drive him to desperate measures.

When one day Vusi had come home talking about how people became rich only by stealing from others, she had discouraged him from nursing such thoughts by saying what he was thinking was

the same as a woman resorting to prostitution to ease the pressure on their children. They agreed that such practices were the surest sign of weakness in the face of desolation.

At the end of the month they paid forty rand of the money they had come to accept that they owed, plus that month's amount; and braced themselves for the next one. At least that month it would be slightly better because the old lady's pension was also due.

Someone had told Dikeledi that what was happening to them was what had happened to her before she was thrown out into the streets after her own husband had been stabbed to death in a Soweto-bound train. A person with money goes to the superintendents and tells them that he needs a house badly. They tell him that in view of the fact that nowadays there's so little money and so many people going around without any, those in possession of a little carry more weight than those who have none at all — so what about a coupla hundred rand and a solid, electrified, four-roomed matchbox at, say Mzimhlope? 'You see,' they go on, 'you Bantus think that all Europeans are rich and well-paid in their jobs. But I and my colleagues here can assure you that we don't get enough; so we have to make a little for ourselves on the side too. How much can you afford?' they ask.

'Three hundred,' answers the prospective buyer, the thought of what would happen to those who lived in the house never having entered the minds of both men.

'You have a house,' and the green tigers exchange hands.

'Righto! Come and see us at the end of the month.'

At the time Dikeledi's friend was relating this, little did they realise that a similar deal was the subject of difference between a superintendent and a man who had paid money to get a house. The person who had paid was getting impatient. He was demanding service or his money back and the money was no longer available.

'You said to come and see you at the end of the last month. When I came you said to wait a bit. Now you tell me that the house is not yet ready and meanwhile you've taken and spent my money. I doubt if there was ever any house or if I'll ever get one. It's either I have the house now or you give back what you took from me. Otherwise I'm going to expose the whole thing through the papers,' the young man said heatedly. He had decided that the only way in which he could compel the superintendent to perform his obligation or return his money was to show him that he was capable of embarrassing him.

While the superintendent listened to these taunts, the whole of his body turned hot with rage at being addressed that way by an 'inferior', but especially the bit about the newspapers unsettled him. 'Nowadays the WRAB is getting a lot of bad publicity as an organisation to disorganise the lives of Bantus. These English papers!' he thought. 'Now the bloody unmannered kaffir is threatening to bring them into our money making scheme, our secret. That's what comes of an opposition that plays *verligte* and screams at you to give the Bantus a decent education and a better deal. Build them a machine to run their affairs and the first thing is for you to fashion houses with a magic wand to keep up with their galloping birthrate. *Here*, how I wish for the good old days when Bantus were Bantus and knew their place. Bring them out of the bush and teach them to read and write and they think they're smart enough to swear at the *baas*. Good old Bantus . . . that rings a bell! That old woman. The one who owed a hundred rand. Let's see how much she managed to pay. If she hasn't paid all, it's the bantustan for her and the stupid in front of me gets off my neck. Then I can breathe freely again, without thinking of the damn English papers that are busy agitating the kaffirs to demand rights; ha, ha, rights in a whiteman's land? They should have been banned too. I don't know why they were left out because they endanger our security and therefore that of the state too.'

He brightened up at stumbling upon a solution for his problem. He remembered that the *ouma* had shown little resistance when confronted with the amount she supposedly owed. If she had not paid all, which he was positive was as beyond her reach as the faintest star that she could see on the brightest night, he would bring down the wrath of god upon her. This trick always worked. She would relinquish the house to him, no, to the board, and go live with her relatives. The good thing with them is the way they can live in crowded conditions. He put that down to their strong family ties, and 'the way they breed'; baby girls with child before they know where they themselves came from. 'That is what they know best, sex and liquor.'

To the fuming man in front of him he said, 'Now, now, quiet down. Don't flip your top, man. How can we solve your matter if we make threats at each other?'

'You better be quick. I'm not prepared to listen to your cheating anymore.'

Barely restraining himself from striking out at the 'cheeky Bantu' the superintendent ordered the clerk, and not in the kindest terms

either, to produce old Mrs Nyembezi's file.

'Hawu, my friend, you haven't gone to work today?' I asked when I met Vusi at the station at about seven in the morning the other day, a time when he should have been at work. He had to be on the five o'clock train to be on time.

His hands were sunk deep in his pockets and his shoulders hunched. His head was not held as high as I had known him to hold it. He dragged his feet when he walked and he took a long time to return my greeting. I knew immediately that my friend's spirits were down. Something was wrong and I knew from his dejected semblance that I would not like it when he told me. Yet I wanted to know. That was what friendship was made for.

'I didn't go my friend, *is sleg*,' he replied slowly in a downcast voice.

'Why, what's it, Vus'? Why do you look like your homestead has been burnt down? Is it because your *baas* is going to halve your wages and make you work overtime for nothing to cover lost production when you return to work? Don't fret about money, that is the root of evil. Your teacher taught you as much, didn't he?' I went on in an attempt to cheer him out of the doldrums.

'I'm going to the office. The "blackies" took my mother there for the second time this morning. The first time was last month,' and he proceeded to tell me about what had happened since that first visit from the WRAB. He blurted out his story with unbridled bitterness, emphasising that the debt was a fabrication aimed at squeezing them out of the house. His bitterness spilled over to me and by the time he got to the end I was helping him to curse those who were bringing his already destitute world crumbling down around him. He finished off by saying, 'South Africa! A cruel, cruel world with nothing but a slow death for us. I hate it, *mfo*, I hate it!'

I accompanied him to the office. That was all I could do to help my friend to try and save his home, the four-roomed centre of his life. He kept asking me what he could do and I hated myself for being so impotent in the face of a friend's distress. He told me that he did not know where he would go if all this was building up to an eviction. Let alone Dikeledi and the three children, because the other one, his late sister's retarded daughter, would be returned to a home at Krugersdorp where she had spent the previous year. I tried to strengthen him by telling him that everything would turn out alright in the end; he was only being pessimistic, the WRAB officials were also human and would not be so callous as to throw them out into the dusty streets.

We did not stay long at the office either, for as soon as he and his mother came before the superintendent concerned, the one with the beaky nose, all hell broke loose. They were told in the crudest terms that, seeing they had been given two months to pay and they had managed only forty percent, the board had no choice but to repossess its house and give it to another person who would pay the rent without trouble. When Vusi tried to point out that the time had not been stipulated and neither had the two months mentioned expired, he was cut off by the inevitable question, 'Do you mean to say I'm telling lies, boy? Your mother lied to you, huh? Your mother's fault. She should have told you that the money was wanted immediately.'

And turning to Mrs Nyembezi, he asked, 'You are not ashamed to lie at your age, *ouma*?' But she did not understand.

'Would you please give us another week, *meneer*? We've got another thirty-five rand with us; we'll do all we can to raise the balance this week. Please help us, sir, we haven't anywhere to go if you chase us out. Here's the thirty-five rand. Show him, ma, show him,' Vusi said in his best pleading voice. The old woman produced the folded notes which were tied in a knot of her handkerchief and gave them to Vusi who tried to hand them to the superintendent. The latter threw Vusi's hand so violently aside that the money flew out of his hand. 'Can't you hear, I say your time to pay is long overdue!' he screamed. 'Now get out. By sunset I want you out of that house or I'm having you arrested — hear? I'll be there to make sure.'

The clerks who were working at their desks and the two other white men continued unperturbed by the scene. Only one or two black clerks, one of them a woman, threw half-interested glances. The people who were there for their own problems ogled and hissed softly, the way black people do to express sympathy without words.

One ten rand note had landed on the desk of one of the other superintendents. As Vusi took it, their eyes met. There was a smirk of sadistic satisfaction in the man's eyes, like one who was deriving pleasure out of a tragic scene in a drama. To show his approval to the villain, he winked at the latter and smiled. His thick eyebrows, large facial bones and the bristles growing out of his nostrils made him look like a lion.

I saw it on their faces the moment my friend and his aged mother stepped out of the hall. I did not ask them anything because I wanted to save them the agony of going over the details

of their disastrous meeting with the superintendent. I wished that I had not been there to share those first moments of their tragedy because it was now my responsibility to console them and I did not know what to say. I was dumbfounded and so were they. It was hard for all of us to accept that they were now homeless. We said very few words all the way from Phefeni to Mzimhlope, and Vusi's mother moaned from time to time. I hated to think that I was going to be there when they were removing their belongings from the house, actively assisting them to carry out the heartless bidding of the superintendent.

When we came to the house Vusi's mother asked him to make tea before everything. 'At least I'm entitled to a last cup of tea in what has been my home for the great part of my life,' she mumbled. Old as she was, her composure was remarkable. That desperate look had gone from her creased face. She gave me the impression that she looked forward to the bleak future as if it were one more challenge in addition to the many which had comprised her life.

Before the tea was ready, Beak Nose and Lion Face, true to the former's word, arrived in the van. There were three black men in overalls with them. The two officials alighted from the vehicle with a marked urgency and the three other men followed them and stood waiting for orders on the stoep. Beak Nose and Lion Face barged into the house without knocking. There was no need to knock.

Seeing an official van and whites coming out of it into the house brought the neighbourhood out to watch. Children who had been playing in the street abandoned their games and ran home shouting, 'Abelungu, abelungu! At Temba's home!' Their mothers left their chores unfinished to stand in their small yards with folded arms and curious expressions on their plump faces. Seeing a white man in Soweto was like seeing an eskimo in the middle of the Sahara desert. And when he went into a house, it could only mean one thing, namely trouble for the people living there.

'Jislaaik Gert! The blerry fools are still sitting!' Beak Nose exclaimed. 'Didn't I tell you to get out of this fucken house immediately? I told you that I shouldn't find you here!'

Gert played up to the tune. 'And you're still sitting! Can't you hear what says the *baas*? All you want now is the fucken police to come and show you the gate. C'mon, get moving, I say!' and I ducked as he made as if to strike me with his open hand.

I joined Vusi in the kitchen and we stood there, reluctant to start

moving the things. It was all so untrue and yet so true that they were being thrown out by the scruff of the neck, like a drama enacted in a cruel nightmare. Mrs Nyembezi did not move from where she was sitting, holding her hands together and looking her persecutors in the face, no longer afraid of them but hating them — no their deed — with all her being. I say their deed because I never knew that old woman to bear hatred for another human.

Gert saw that we were not getting started and called in the three waiting outside to cast out everything into the street, as well as the three of us if need be. They got to work like mules and soon everything down to the last rag was in the street. When they finished, Beak Nose demanded the keys and the house was locked. The officials got into the front of the van and the three black men behind. With screeching tyres they were gone from sight.

The people, who had all along watched from a distance, converged upon Vusi's mother to ask what was wrong although they had already guessed. They came with shawls draped over their shoulders as if someone had died and they were joining the bereaved in mourning. They did the only thing they could to show that they were grieved at losing a long-time neighbour that way. They collected fifteen rand, saying that perhaps it would help them to persuade the office people to take the payment if only ten rand was short. Some advised that it would be better to take the money to the WRAB offices at New Canada where there were white social workers.

Mrs Nyembezi now had fifty rand in the knot of her handkerchief. Vusi began to cheer up a little at this. 'This is the best thing for us to do, my friend,' he said. 'I'll take the money to the social workers at New Canada. They'll understand the whole bleeding thing better than those sadists at Phefeni. What I'll do tomorrow is to go and borrow the ten rand from the *mashonisa* where I work and by the time they open the offices at New Canada I'll be waiting for them.'

'Ya. I agree that's the best thing to do. How the hell did we overlook that angle when those Phefeni people would not understand? If we had gone straight to New Canada from Uncle Tom's perhaps all this would have been prevented.'

As the following day's events at New Canada proved, we were presuming too far as regards both the readiness and the ability of the social workers to help our cause.

Dikeledi's arrival from work coincided with that of the new tenant's to see what sort of place he would be moving into. The

stranger arrived in a Chevar, which placed him among the fortunate of the sprawling locations.

It had been decided that there would be no harm in returning the furniture into the backyard while it was being decided where it would be taken. So, of the two, only Dikeledi saw that something was terribly wrong, from the way in which those who knew her looked at her as she walked from the station. The first thing that entered her mind was her three children. When she approached the house the missing curtains told her the whole story.

She was opening the battered gate when the stranger stopped the car behind her and called out, 'Sorry, girl.' He was not being disrespectful. Dikeledi was no more than a girl. 'May I ask?'

She turned and went back to the car.

'Do you stay here?' he asked, noting the way she swallowed nervously.

'Yes *buti*. I stay here.'

'I . . . er. Okay, let me come out.'

He came around the car and stood with his hands on his hips. He wore a navy blue suit, a snow white shirt and a blue tie with small white dots. There was the air of confidence about him which is characteristic of those who have just found a way to keep their heads above the water. Most probably very recently married and badly in need of his own four-room. Dikeledi felt uneasy standing before him, the way she felt when she faced a white man.

'*Awu*,' and he paused, perplexed. 'I thought this was a vacant house, *mos*. Is anybody else around? I see there are no curtains.' Dikeledi thought he had a friendly, though puzzled voice.

'I don't know, *buti*. I'm just arriving from work and I'm just as baffled. I'll see if they're there.' She turned and headed for the gate.

'Let's go in together,' he said and followed her.

She knocked on the front door but there was no response. They went round to the back of the house along the small passage, jumping to avoid the puddles made by the water from the leaking drain-pipe which Vusi had recently repaired as best as he could, after it was reported twice and in vain at the office. The drain-water turned the dust into a rank paste that brought the flies in swarms.

Vusi and I had gone out to buy fatcakes. We could have sent little Temba but we had to have an excuse to get away from the continuous sympathisers and location gossip mongers.

Dikeledi and the stranger came upon the backyard scene unexpectedly. It struck them with an impact which broke down the

girl's composure and she wept uncontrollably. She had gone to work knowing that her mother-in-law (by her common law marriage) had been hauled out of bed to face the authorities at the office. Until she saw the curtainless windows and, finally, their rags strewn around in the backyard, she had not thought the visits in the small hours of the morning to be anything more than little inconveniences that were an integral part of a black person's life.

The stranger stood at the corner of the house, taking in everything slowly. The dilapidated state of the furniture and the piles of rags, the extreme poverty that he was witnessing did not shock him, because it was part of his life too. He had come upon such desolation a million times in his life and perhaps he might have come through it too. What made his heart bleed more than anything was the realisation that he had contributed to everything that he saw before him. Where would these people go if he took their home from them? It had been stupid of him to think that he would be given a vacant house. There simply was not a single vacant house in the whole of Soweto. That was why people stayed on the waiting list for houses for decades. He had thought that he could avoid waiting for eternity, when more houses would be built, by paying to be considered whenever a house became vacant. Those who had tricked him into causing anguish to this poor family had assured him that houses did become vacant. He had not delved deeply into what they said and had been only too pleased when they took his money. His idea of an empty house was, say, that people there were leaving of their own accord. The shock wave of 'seventy-six, the year of the tumults, had sent many a timid soul packing for the sleeping countryside. He also knew that there were many lonely old people with no one to look after them, who kept their houses on doles so that they might at least die under a roof and not like dogs, in the wilderness. These derelict humans were only too prepared to accept young couples who would take over their houses and give them shelter and food until death arrived to deliver them from unrewarded lifetimes.

The thought that a whole family would be thrown out to make way for him had never entered his mind. It was immoral and he would not be a willing party to it. He wanted his money back and he would add to it to build himself two small rooms in the backyard of his home and wait there for eternity. They were still childless and by the time they were really forced by circumstances to leave home something might have cropped up for him or he might have saved enough to have a room built for him on the new thirty-year

lease system.

We came as he was telling Mrs Nyembezi what to do. 'Please ma, do exactly as I'm telling you. You said your son would try and get the rand, neh? It's a pity I have nothing on me, otherwise I would help. Tell him . . .'

'Here he is, my son. I was hoping he would turn up so that you could tell him what is to be done.' She called Vusi. 'Come and meet your brother here. He has been very good to us. God works in wonders.' The goodheartedness of the young man of slightly more than our age was reflected in her eyes.

She introduced them and left them to discuss the matter by themselves, 'because you are young and understand the ways of the white man better than we old people, who allowed ourselves to become their sacrificial lambs.'

I went to join them.

We listened carefully to each word that the man told us. In short he advised us not to waste precious time by trying to take the money to the superintendent who had ordered the eviction, because he would still refuse it and sell the house to someone else so as to raise the money he had received from the young man. 'The best thing to do is, take the money to New Canada, as the old lady has told me you've already planned to do. The social workers might be of some help in persuading the officials to take the money. But this man is a *skelm* as you have seen for yourselves. He might have tipped off the others at New Canada and you might never even get to explain your problem to a social worker. Don't make a mistake about it, my friends, these whites benefit together from our sufferings. So I doubt if, when you come there looking for a social worker to help you with such a problem, you will be taken to the right people. If they don't attend to your matter satisfactorily, go either to the *Daily Mail* or *Star* offices and tell them the whole thing. Don't leave out a single scrap of information. The *Star* or *Mail* people will do their best to help.'

We thanked him heartily for his noble deed in refusing the house because of Mrs Nyembezi and her family, and giving advice about what was to be done. The old ladies accompanied him to his car.

Everybody was blessing the stranger for his kindness. I was inclined right then to become a little superstitious by thinking that if the affairs of man *are* run by a just omnipotent, then that was the subtle way in which he made his presence known to us.

'Do you think it would be wise to put the things back inside?' Vusi asked me.

'It's locked up, *mos*. How are we going to open?'

'I should have asked for the key from that guy. He couldn't have come here without one. They must have given him one at the office,' Vusi said.

'What do we do then? Commit HB? It would be too risky. Remember that the bloody house is under the control of those sadists and boy, should they find you here!' I opined.

'You're speaking the gospel truth, my friend. They might return in the middle of the night. It means our troubles are not yet over, then. Let me sound the old lady.'

'*Awu*, women!' she said to the five or so matrons who were crowded around her. 'The little ones are not lying when they sing that the burden of our lives is heavy. A glimmer of hope in the dark and you follow it. Before you're anywhere up crops another problem. Vusi here asks whether it's safe to go back inside the house since that boy, who is now the rightful tenant, wouldn't mind us keeping the house.'

'Hey, my mother's child, that good child is not the superintendent. You may make matters worse for yourselves if you do that. Wait until you get permission to go back into the house,' one woman gave as her sound opinion.

The neighbours offered to divide the furniture and other things and to keep them until everything was back to normal. Some wanted to give them a place to sleep in their own crowded homes, but Mrs Nyembezi declined politely, saying that they had already done enough for them by donating the fifteen rand and taking their belongings for safekeeping. She would take one of the children to her sister at Orlando East and the two little ones who still needed their mother's care would go with the latter to Mofolo, to her sister. The retarded one would be returned to the 'welfare' at Krugersdorp. She turned to Vusi. 'Where will you go Vus?'

'I haven't decided yet, ma. But I'll see. Maybe I'll go to uncle at Klipspruit. But today I'm sleeping here at Mzimhlope. I'll find a place somewhere with my friends.'

But we slept in that controversial matchbox that night with the two blankets that Vusi had taken saying that he wanted to contribute those at least wherever he was going to sleep — which would have been at my place, only then he insisted on sleeping 'home'. He told me that the whole police force, let alone the 'blackies', would never stop him from sleeping there that night. I couldn't help but sleep there, also. You might not care to know that we remained on edge the whole night. The hard floor and thin

blankets did not worry us very much; we were used to that in jail. It was the possibility of being found there by the WRAB people that robbed us of sleep.

The morning brought us great relief. We washed at my place and set out to where Vusi worked to see his *mashonisa* about the ten rand. Moneylenders are only too obliged to extend credit.

Vusi explained to a pleasant young white man why he had not turned up the previous day and that he wanted that day off, too. Without demanding the usual 'proof' he gave Vusi permission to attend to his affairs until they were settled and he assured him that that would not affect his paypacket. How contrasting people can be!

Our next destination was New Canada. The white so-called lady social worker sat with her stony face balanced in the palm of her left hand. By the time Vusi came to the end of his story I wasn't sure that he was not reciting his tale of woe to a wax mannequin — but for the incessant yawning of his listener. The problem was not communication, because Afrikaans is one of the seven languages that Vusi can speak with reasonable fluency, the others being: Zulu, English, Sotho, Pedi, Xhosa, Shangani.

'I'm sorry I can't help you boys. Go back to your superintendent and seek his forgiveness. You must have been disrespectful for him not to take your money. That's all I can suggest.' And she erased us from her attention as if we had suddenly vanished.

The next train took us to Westgate station. At the *Star* offices we were received cordially. A statement of my friend's plight was taken down and he was assured that it would be thoroughly dealt with. He was told to return in a fortnight to hear the result.

Meanwhile we stay with crossed fingers and prayers that things may take a better turn. Vusi is at Klipspruit with an uncle. It is two days since I last saw him. He passes my place on his way back from work. I wonder what is keeping him from coming.

My Other Cousin, Sitha

For Ntsikie

Mbulelo Mzamane

Just how I happened to fall for the paraffin one, week in and week out, still puzzles me. I never approved of Sitha's weekly disappearance. I loathed Slakes, the fellow who always hijacked her. I simply couldn't understand why she preferred him to her other boyfriend, Martin, who didn't land her in the same trouble. But come Friday and I became an accessory, as it were, after the fact.

When my father was transferred to Johannesburg, my mother remained with relatives in Brakpan, in order to be near the Far East Rand Non-European Hospital where she worked. She only came home when she was day-off. My father worked in the vast parish of Moroka, which has since been divided into four parishes. The main church in Senaoana, where he also had his office, was a good distance from home. When he was not in his office, he was doing parish visits, on a bicycle. Most of the time, therefore, we were left to our own devices. Being the eldest among us, my cousin Sitha then became the mistress of the house. We enjoyed so much freedom that I seldom went to school. On a few occasions when I did, it was because I had a rock group which practised daily, after lessons.

On Fridays, when Sitha returned from school, she made fire and placed the pots on the stove. Then she instructed my sisters, who remained playing outside, to watch over the pots — which meant we often ate charcoal-flavoured food for supper. She vanished into the bathroom to wash, as though she hadn't washed in the morning before going to school, and emerged with shiny legs and a face masked in Butone. Because I have such a passion for music, I duly resented being dragged from under my pile of records to accompany her to the shops.

'Sabelo, get the paraffin container ready, we're going to the shops,' she'd say.

We bought our groceries from Khanyile's General Dealers. Tat' uKhanyile, the proprietor, was our church warden. We were more than just important customers, we behaved like virtual shareholders. We helped Bhut' Phum, who ran the shop, supervise

the lady who baked fatcakes at the back of the store; we checked to see if customers had collected in sufficient numbers in the shop and, if they had, served them ourselves, shovelling malted toffees and sharps into our pockets as we did so. When we were sent to buy anything, we behaved as at a self-service supermarket and then paid or kept the money, as our fancy dictated. Sitha considered herself above the racket and so let us steal whatever we'd been sent to buy, while she retained the money.

On Fridays, when we went to buy paraffin, I left Sitha on the verandah of the shop, overlooking the Moroka West taxi rank, sauntered in, bade my time, filled up the tin with paraffin and then came out. Invariably, I'd find Slakes already with her.

Slakes belonged to a group which appropriately called itself The Black Swine. They wore black and white fung kong shoes, rustler suits and black skullcaps with elongated tailpieces, rather like the devil's tail. They ruled with an iron hand over White City, which had the only high school, serving more than ten townships. That put all of us who attended the school from Naledi to Mofolo, at the mercy of the Black Swine. For the girls, salvation lay in falling in love. Just how much free will counted in Sitha's case, and how much she was swayed by intimidation, just to what extent she became Slakes's willing victim, I can't tell. There were many girls in her position. My own girlfriend, Puni, from whom I'd had to part, used to argue that she had no alternative. I couldn't believe that when I caught her putting her hand, voluntarily, round Kali's shoulders — he wasn't wielding any knife blade that I could see. She told me that it was all flattery, for the safety of us both. I thought differently. I rather thought my safety lay in breaking with her, if I didn't want my jaws socked. However, since the boys had virtually nothing to offer the Black Swine, not even some token resistance, our fate was more or less sealed. We paid sixpence, every Monday, as protection fee. As the Black Swine had no system of accounting, one had to pay this fee as often as it was demanded, which was on every school day and sometimes twice a day. Occasionally, Slakes rescued me, but most of the time his shifty eyes just passed me over.

'Take it home,' Sitha would say. 'I won't be long.'

I'd take the paraffin home.

She'd disappear until Sunday evening when she came back to get her gym-dress pressed, in readiness for school. I couldn't understand why she took so much trouble over her gyms, since she wasn't a regular at school. I was only prevented from reporting

the matter to my father by the fact that I wasn't such a model of attendance either.

My father is very long-suffering. But when he gets angry, you thank your ancestors you aren't on the receiving end. He never fails to point out that even our Lord wasn't averse to using the whip, and applies the maxim himself with apostolic zeal. In Sitha's case, he first tried every possible method to reform her. He pleaded with her and sometimes adopted a very menacing tone; he begged her to show some consideration for his public image; he appealed to her not to jeopardise her own future; he reasoned with her, threatened her, but all to no avail.

One Friday afternoon he returned home much earlier than usual. We'd already left for the shops. He changed into his great overcoat, although the evening temperature in December was very high, and followed us. I bumped into him, on my way back home, at the corner near the Nazarene church.

'Where's she?' he asked.

'Tata?' I still have the habit of pretending deafness and incomprehension whenever I'm at a loss for an answer. I expected my father to repeat his question, instead of which he fixed me with an unnerving stare. I hated to betray Sitha. 'I left her talking to some friends.'

'Where?'

'Outside Khanyile's.'

'What friends?'

'Some gentlemen'

He didn't wait for my reply. I knocked into a small boy, pushing a tyre, as I craned my neck to catch my father's disappearing figure. He vanished into a thick crowd around the taxi rank. I knew then that Sitha had had it.

He mingled with the crowd but kept a close watch on the couple, who were holding hands on the stoep outside the shop. In due course, Sitha and Slakes took a taxi. My father also got into an empty one and ordered the driver to trail the one in which Sitha and Slakes were travelling.

I can only fill in the rest from my father's report: at the crossroads in White City the taxi in front stopped, and the one behind drove on a few blocks before stopping. With his coat collar raised to the level of his ears, my father followed them to a house in White City. Since he only wanted to find out where they were going, he turned at the gate of the house they'd entered and went for the police.

They were in bed when he returned in the black maria, accompanied by about ten policemen from the Moroka police station. They had little trouble in persuading Slakes to open the door. In fact, he had hoped to satisfy their enquiries at the door, and opened it with only a blanket around his body. The police squadron budged in, my father at the tail end.

What followed was, strictly speaking, illegal — but the police realised just how necessary it was for my father to let off steam a bit, and so they let it continue for a while. From under his greatcoat he produced a sjambok. One of my father's few boasts is the expert way in which he used to fight with sticks as a boy, looking after cattle in the Transkei. I once witnessed his expertise in Brakpan the day he thrashed Don, who was regarded by all who knew him as the boss of the township. Don was an indiscriminate bully who thrived on the cautious nature of township folk. He could close a function, be it a stokvel or a church bazaar, merely by telling everybody to leave the premises. But my father had never heard of Don before their encounter at a party to celebrate the christening of a daughter of one of my father's parishioners. Don descended on the gathering like a Philistine and demanded liquor. When he was told that there was none, he ordered the host to close the party. My father was so furious that he slipped into one of the bedrooms, unobserved, and returned with a stick. He gave Don a beating which remained the talk of the township long after we'd left Brakpan. The thrashing Slakes received that evening left him with welts the size of hose-pipes. No doubt worse damage would have been done if, at a certain stage, the police had not thought it fit to intervene. When he decided to turn to Sitha, the police again threw themselves between them.

Sitha and Slakes were marched into the black maria in their birthday suits, with only their blankets around them. Dad carried her clothes in a bundle, under his armpit. They drove them to the police station, where the police went through the motions of taking statements. After more intimidation, they were released and told they'd hear from the police as soon as a day had been fixed for their trial. There was to be no trial but the whole show was calculated to act as a repellent, which it did. Slakes was released and told to make himself scarce. The police drove Sitha and my father home.

Thanks to the township telegraphic system, the following morning the story was all over the place. For days afterwards, Slakes elicited giggles wherever he appeared. His swaggering walk

had lost a bit of its former bounce, I noticed.

We became a complete family again, from Friday to Friday. Even my mother eventually transferred from the Far East to Baragwanath Hospital.

At this time, the happiest man was undoubtedly Martin.

Martin had matriculated at Lovedale Institution. He worked as a dispatch clerk at some factory in Doornfontein. He wanted to become a lawyer and was studying for a diploma, by correspondence, through the University of South Africa. He also taught Sunday School, sang in the church choir and was generally every parent's idea of a decent young man. Naturally, he was as suited to his environment as is a specialist surgeon who suddenly finds he has to exchange positions with a village butcher.

On Saturday afternoons we attended church choir practices: my mother, Sitha and I. We even formed a double quartet with some close family friends and met on alternate Sundays, when my mother was afternoon-off. Martin who had not the slightest respect for pitch, tune or time was in it from the beginning. He never missed a practice. His enthusiasm made up for his tone-deafness and assured him a permanent place in the choir. Just how the grown-ups tolerated him, I couldn't understand. We'd never have considered him, even during a crisis or for comic effects, in my pop group.

My family is sharply divided into two: those who can sing and those who can't. The latter group is invariably more critical than the former. Their ears are paradoxically more faultless, and their taste more cultivated. They try to hide their inability to correct any false notes they hear by producing equally off-key guffaws. They were always present at our practices because Martin's singing gave them no end of amusement. They were untiring in their efforts to provide us with new songs, especially those with very complicated transitions. My only good memory of these practices lies in the consolatory fact that we never actually performed in public.

These choral occasions also served as amorous encounters between Martin and Sitha. To be able to check your girlfriend, as they say, at her home, before her parents, is no mean achievement. That sort of thing does not occur commonly outside our white suburbs. It is not customary, but where it occurs it is the measure of the boyfriend's acceptability.

Many a squabble between families has arisen over the issue of children in love. My younger brother, Soso, once created strained

relations between my family and the Qwathis, who had several daughters, because every time he went to check, he rained such stones over their roof to summon his girl out that one evening, unable to bear it any longer, Tat' uQwathi came out in person and chased him right to the doorstep of our house. I was once punched red in the face by an outraged parent who found me and his daughter locked in a tight embrace, in his sitting room. It's always best to grab your girl and disappear with her, into the bushes. You dare not risk even taking her out for a walk in a township teeming with Black Swine.

In a way, I envied Martin, who actually had supper with us every Sunday. Not that I really care much for that kind of affair. It may have class but it lacks adventure. Besides, the other family always imagines it has a permanent claim on you, a thing which makes it very difficult to break the silver cup. Still it is something to boast about when you are actually admitted to her home.

After Sunday practices, Sitha and Martin would go out for a walk. They usually went to watch soccer or to the library which was converted to a hall over weekends for ballroom dancing. They seldom strayed far from home. He always brought her back dead on time for supper.

One Sunday afternoon they invited me to accompany them to Baragwanath, to visit a sick aunt of Martin's. At Moroka West we waited in vain for a taxi and eventually decided to try Moroka Central. Near Elkah Stadium we bumped into a gang of Black Swine. It was all so unexpected that there was no turning back. They simply emerged from nowhere, Slakes among them.

Fortunately they let Martin and me pass, unmolested, but Slakes stayed Sitha behind.

Martin had bought some fruit for his aunt which he and Sitha had been carrying in a paper-bag between them. The paper-bag remained with Sitha.

We walked up a steep hill to the taxi rank in silence, occasionally glancing back to see if Sitha was following.

At the taxi rank I met a schoolmate, Mafa, and we began to chat about all sorts of irrelevant matters. Half an hour later, Mafa decided to proceed on his way to the football ground, to watch a soccer derby between the local rivals, Moroka Swallows and Desert Rats. I wanted to accompany Mafa to the match but Martin pleaded with me to remain with him.

An hour passed, still no Sitha!

'It's almost past visiting time,' Martin said. 'We could at least

drop the fruit at the hospital. Will you go and see if she'll give us the paper-bag?'

One of Boswell's famous acts was popping his head in and out of a live lion's mouth. But the circus king fell victim to his own pranks. He was eaten alive by one of his own lions. I've a very well-developed survival instinct. I'm as mad as my neighbour, no worse, and equally sensitive to danger. Martin's suggestion fell on deaf ears.

We stood at the rank watching and never for a moment letting them out of sight.

Slakes decided to sit on the grass near the road. After a while Sitha followed his example.

Excited voices rose from the nearby soccer pitch.

Slakes and Sitha eventually stood up and, hand in hand, decided to walk in the direction from which we'd come. That did it.

'I'm going to the ground,' I said.

'Let's get the fruit,' Martin said.

I looked up and down and wondered where he was born.

'It's well past the visiting hour,' I said.

'Please, Sabelo, my *swaer*, what shall we say when we get home?'

'I'm not going home, at least not just yet. We can go home after the match. She'll be home by then.'

I walked resolutely across the street. Martin followed me.

The match was in the second half. My side was trailing Desert Rats by an odd goal. It was a very stiff match. Gloom enveloped the Swallows camp, until Rhee got the ball near the centre line. He dribbled past two opponents and passed the ball to Aarah who heeled it to Differ. Differ unleashed a cannonball from outside the eighteens which left the opposing goalkeeper as flat-footed as a duck. From then on it was us all the way. In the closing stages of the game Carlton intercepted a loose ball and dished it to the evergreen Differ, who was standing unmarked inside the opponents' eighteens. Baboon, Desert Rats' running back, charged in and brought Differ down with a tackle that would have been discouraged even in rugby. The referee unhesitatingly awarded a penalty. Desert Rats disputed his decision. Chaos broke loose. Supporters of both teams swarmed onto the field. Martin forgot himself and rushed on with the rest, muttering something about 'infringement' and 'constitution'. The referee blew his whistle to signal the end of the match. The last we saw of him, he was running for dear life in the direction of Moroka police station with

three youths, brandishing glittering blades, in hot pursuit.

The players went to change into their clothes at one corner of the field. We clustered round them, indulging in a post-mortem of the match, as liberal with advice as only spectators can be.

Martin was explaining the league's constitution to someone who seemed to pay very little attention to him.

Soon everybody began to trickle away. Martin and I were among the last to leave.

It was dark when we got back home, now trooping as solemnly as tragedians.

'What shall we say?' Martin asked, when we reached the gate.

'Say we left her dancing at the library and went to the football ground.'

'But we can't say that. We should have gone straight to the police and not procrastinated. Suppose something happens to her? This chap could be hauled in for forcible abduction and possible seduction.'

Damn the fellow with his long words and his law!

'Better say we left her at the library, if we're asked, that is.'

Someone opened the door and terminated our argument.

'Thought I recognised your voices. Come in. Supper's almost ready. Mom was beginning to worry about your whereabouts.'

Sitha held the door for us and shut it after us.

When we had mixed fruit for dessert, I didn't ask where the fruit had come from. I ate with an appetite which astonished my mother.

'You should take him out more often,' she told Martin.

I didn't choke at the remarks which followed either.

'Oh! Don't think we're ungrateful,' she continued. 'Thanks a lot for the fruit.'

Riva

Richard Rive

A cold, misty July afternoon about twenty years ago. I first met Riva Lipschitz under the most unusual circumstances. At that time I was a first year student majoring in English at university, one of the rare coloured students then enrolled at Cape Town. When I first saw her Riva's age seemed indefinable. Late thirties? Forty perhaps? Certainly more than twenty years older than I was. The place we met in was as unusual as her appearance. The Rangers' hut at the top of Table Mountain near the Hely Hutchinson Reservoir, three thousand feet above Cape Town.

George, Leonard and I had been climbing all day. George was talkative, an extrovert, given to clowning. Leonard was his exact opposite, shy and introspective. We had gone through high school together but after matriculating they had gone to work while I had won a scholarship which enabled me to proceed to university. We had been climbing without rest all afternoon, scrambling over rugged rocks damp with bracken and heavy with mist. Twice we were lost on the path from India Ravine through Echo Valley. Now soaking wet and tired we were finally in the vicinity of the Rangers' hut where we knew we would find shelter and warmth. Some ranger or other would be off duty and keep the fire warm and going. Someone with a sense of humour had called the hut *At Last*. It couldn't be the rangers for they never spoke English. On the way we passed the hut belonging to the white Mountain Club, and slightly below that was another hut reserved for members of the coloured Club. I made some remark about the white club house and the fact that prejudice had permeated even to the top of Table Mountain.

'For that matter we would not even be allowed into the coloured Mountain Club hut,' George remarked, serious for once.

'And why not?'

'Because, dear brother Paul, to get in you can't only be coloured, but you must also be not too coloured. You must have the right complexion, the right sort of hair, the right address and speak the right sort of Walmer Estate English.'

'You mean I might not make it?'

'I mean exactly that.'

I made rapid mental calculations. I was rather dark, had short, curly hair, came from Caledon Street in District Six, but spoke

English reasonably well. After all I was majoring in it at a white university. What more could one want?

'I'm sure that at a pinch I could make it,' I teased George. 'I speak English beautifully and am educated well beyond my intelligence.'

'My dear Paul, it won't help. You are far too coloured, University of Cape Town and all. You are far, far too brown. And, in addition, you have a lousy address.'

I collapsed in mock horror. 'You can't hold all that against me.'

Leonard grinned. He was not one for saying much.

We trudged on, instinctively skirting both club huts as widely as possible, until we reached *At Last*, which was ten minutes slogging away, just over the next ridge. A large main room with a very welcome fire going in the cast-iron stove. How the hell did they get that stove up there when our haversacks felt like lead? Running off the main room were two tiny bedrooms belonging to each of the rangers. We removed damp haversacks and sleeping bags, then took off damp boots and stockings. Both rangers were off duty and made room for us at the fire. They were small, wiry Plattelanders; a hard breed of men with wide-eyed, yellow faces, short hair and high cheekbones. They spoke a pleasant, soft, guttural Afrikaans with a distinct Malmesbury brogue, and broke into easy laughter especially when they tried to speak English. The smell of warming bodies filled the room and steam rose from our wet shirts and shorts. It became uncomfortably hot and I felt sleepy, so decided to retire to one of the bedrooms, crawl into my bag and read myself to sleep. I lit a lantern and quietly left the group. George was teasing the rangers and insisting that they speak English. I was reading a novel about the massacre in the ravines of Babi Yar, gripping and revolting; a bit out of place in the unnatural calm at the top of a cold, wet mountain. I was beginning to doze off comfortably when the main door of the hut burst open and a blast of cold air swept through the entire place, almost extinguishing the lantern. Before I could shout anything there were loud protests from the main room. The door slammed shut again and then followed what sounded like a muffled apology. A long pause, then I made out George saying something. There was a short snort which was followed by peals of loud, uncontrolled laughter. I felt it was uncanny. The snort, then the rumbling laughter growing in intensity, then stopping abruptly.

By now I was wide awake and curious to know to whom the laugh belonged, though far too self-conscious to join the group

immediately. I strained to hear scraps of conversation. Now and then I could make out George's voice and the low, soft Afrikaans of the rangers. There was also another voice which sounded feminine, but nevertheless harsh and screechy. My curiosity was getting the better of me. I climbed out of the sleeping bag and as unobtrusively as possible joined the group around the fire. The newcomer was a gaunt, angular white woman, extremely unattractive, looking incongruous in heavy, ill-fitting mountaineering clothes. She was the centre of the discussion and enjoying it. She was in the middle of making a point when she spotted me. Her finger remained poised in mid-air.

'And who may I ask is that?' She stared at me. I looked back into her hard, expressionless grey eyes.

'Will someone answer me?'

'Who?' George asked grinning at my obvious discomfort.

'Him. That's who.'

'Oh him?' George laughed. 'He's Paul. He's the greatest literary genius the coloured people have produced this decade. He's written a poem.'

'How exciting,' she dismissed me. The others laughed. They were obviously under her spell. 'Let me introduce you. This is Professor Paul. First year B.A., University of Cape Town.'

'Cut it out,' I said very annoyed at him. George ignored my remark.

'And you are? I have already forgotten.'

She made a mock, ludicrous bow. 'Riva Lipschitz. Madame Riva Lipschitz. The greatest Jewish watch-repairer and mountaineer in Cape Town. Display shop, 352 Long Street.'

'Alright, you've made your point. Professor Paul – Madame Riva Lipschitz.'

I mumbled a greeting, keeping well in the background. I was determined not to participate in any conversation. I found George's flattering her loathsome. The bantering continued to the amusement of the two rangers. Leonard smiled sympathetically at me. I remained poker-faced waiting for an opportunity when I could slip away. George made some amusing remark (I was not listening) and Riva snorted and started to laugh. So that was where it came from. She saw the look of surprise on my face and stopped abruptly.

'What's wrong, Professor? Don't you like the way I laugh?'

'I'm sorry, I wasn't even thinking of it.'

'It makes no difference whether you were or not. Nevertheless I

hate being ignored. If the others can treat me with the respect due to me, why can't you? I'm like a queen, am I not George?' I wasn't sure whether she was serious or not.

'You certainly are like a queen.'

'Everyone loves me except the Professor. Maybe he thinks too much.'

'Maybe he thinks too much of himself,' George added.

She snorted and started to laugh at his witticism. George glowed with pride. I took in her ridiculous figure and dress. She was wearing a little knitted skull-cap, far too small for her, from which wisps of mousy hair were sticking. A thin face, hard around the mouth and grey eyes, with a large nose I had seen in caricatures of Jews. She seemed flat-chested under her thick jersey which ran down to incredible stick-thin legs stuck into heavy woollen stockings and heavily studded climbing boots.

'Come on, Paul, be nice to Riva,' George encouraged.

'Madame Riva Lipschitz, thank you. Don't you think I look like a queen, Professor?'

I maintained my frigid silence.

'Your Professor obviously does not seem over-friendly. Don't you like whites, Professor? I like everyone. I came over specially to be friendly with you people.'

'Whom are you referring to as *you people*?' I was getting angry. She seemed temporarily thrown off her guard at my reaction, but immediately controlled herself and broke into a snort.

'The Professor is extremely sensitive. You should have warned me. He doesn't like me but we shall remain friends all the same; won't we, Professor?'

She shot out her hand for me to kiss. I ignored it. She turned back to George and for the rest of her stay pretended I was not present. When everyone was busy talking I slipped out quietly and returned to the bedroom.

Although falling asleep, I could pick up scraps of conversation. George seemed to be explaining away my reaction, playing the clown to her queen. Then they forgot all about me. I must have dozed off for I awoke suddenly to find someone shaking my shoulder. It was Leonard.

'Would you like to come with us?'

'Where to?'

'Riva's Mountain Club hut. She's invited us over for coffee, and to meet Simon, whoever he is.'

'No, I don't think I'll go.'

'You mustn't take her too seriously.'

'I don't. Only I don't like her type and the way George is playing up to her. Who the hell does she think she is, after all? What does she want with us?'

'I really don't know. You heard she said she was a watch-repairer somewhere in Long Street. Be reasonable, Paul. She's just trying to be friendly.'

'While playing the bloody queen? Who does she think she is because she's white.'

'Don't be like that. Come along with us. She's just another person.'

George appeared grinning widely. He attempted an imitation of Riva's snort.

'You coming or not?' he asked laughing. For that moment I disliked him intensely.

'I'm certainly not.' I rolled over in my bag to sleep.

'Alright, if that's how you feel.'

I heard Riva calling for him, then after a time she shouted 'Goodbye, Professor, see you again some time.' Then she snorted and they went laughing out at the door. The rangers were speaking softly and I joined them around the fire then fell asleep there. I dreamt of Riva striding with heavy, impatient boots and thin-stick legs over mountains of dead bodies in the ravines of Babi Yar. She was snorting and laughing while pushing bodies aside, climbing ever upwards over dead arms and legs.

It must have been much later when I awoke to the door's opening and a stream of cold air rushing into the room. The fire had died down and the rangers were sleeping in their rooms. George and Leonard were stomping and beating the cold out of their bodies.

'You awake, Paul?' George shouted. Leonard shook me gently.

'What scared you?' George asked. 'Why didn't you come and have coffee with the queen of Table Mountain?'

'I can't stand her type. I wonder how you can.'

'Come off it, Paul. She's great fun.' George attempted a snort and then collapsed with laughter.

'Shut up, you fool. You'll wake up the rangers. What the hell did she want here?'

George sat up, tears running down his cheeks. He spluttered and it produced more laughter. 'She was just being friendly, dear brother Paul, just being friendly. Fraternal greetings from her Mountain Club.'

'Her white Mountain Club?'

'Well yes, if you put it that way, her white Mountain Club. She could hardly join the coloured one, now, could she? Wrong hair, wrong address, wrong laugh.'

'I don't care where she goes as long as you keep her away from me. I have no need to play up to Jews and whites.'

'Now really, Paul,' George seemed hurt. 'Are you anti-Semitic as well as being anti-white?' My remark must have hit home.

'No, I'm only anti-Riva Lipschitz.'

'Well anyhow, I like the way she laughs.' He attempted another imitation, but when he started to snort he choked and collapsed to the floor coughing and spluttering. I rolled over in my bag to sleep.

Three months later I was in the vicinity of Upper Long Street. George worked as a clerk at a furniture store in Bree Street. I had been busy with an assignment in the Hiddingh Hall library and had finished earlier than expected. I had not seen him since we had last gone mountaineering, so strolled across to the place where he worked. I wanted to ask about himself, what he had been doing since last we met, about Riva. A senior clerk told me that he had not come in that day. I wandered around aimlessly, at a loss what to do next. I peered into second-hand shops without any real interest. It was late afternoon on a dull, overcast day and it was rapidly getting darker with the promise of rain in the air. Upper Long Street and its surrounding lanes seemed more depressing, more beaten up than the rest of the city. Even more so than District Six. Victorian double-storied buildings containing mean shops on the ground floors spilled over into mean side-streets and lanes. To catch a bus home meant walking all the way down to the bottom of Adderley Street. I might as well walk all the way back. Caledon Street, the noise, dirt and squalor. My mood was as depressing as my immediate surroundings. I did not wish to stay where I was and at the same time did not wish to go home immediately. What was the number she had said? 352 or 325? I peered through the windows of second-hand bookshops without any wish to go inside and browse. 352, yes that was it. Or 325? In any case I had no money to buy books even if I had the inclination to do so. Had George been at work he might have been able to shake me out of this mood, raise my spirits.

I was now past the swimming baths. A dirty fly-spotted delicatessen store. There was no number on the door, but the name was boldly displayed. *Madeira Fruiterers*. Must be owned by

some homesick Portuguese. Next to it what seemed like a dark and dingy watchmakers. *Lipschitz – Master Jewellers*. This must be it. I decided to enter. A shabby, squat, balding man adjusted an eye-piece he was wearing and looked up from a work-bench cluttered with assorted broken watches.

‘Excuse me, are you Mr Lipschitz?’ I wondered whether I should add ‘Master Jeweller’.

‘What exactly do you want?’ He had not answered my question. ‘What can I do for you?’ His accent was guttural and foreign. I thought of Babi Yar. I was about to apologise and say that I had made some mistake when from the far side of the shop came an unmistakable snort.

‘My goodness, if it isn’t the Professor!’ and then the familiar laugh. Riva came from behind a counter. My eyes had become accustomed to the gloomy interior. The squat man was working from the light filtering in through a dirty window. Ricketty showcases and counters cluttered with watches and cheap trinkets. A cat-bin, still wet and smelling pungently stood against the far counter.

‘What brings the Professor here? Coming to visit me?’ She nodded to the squat man indicating that all was in order. He had already shoved back his eye-piece and was immersed in his work.

‘Come to visit the queen?’

This was absurd. I could not imagine anything less regal, more incongruous. Riva, a queen. As gaunt as she had looked in the Rangers’ hut. Now wearing an unattractive blouse and old-fashioned skirt. Her face as narrow, strained and unattractive as ever. I had to say something, explain my presence.

‘I was just passing.’

‘That’s what they all say. George said so last time.’

What the hell did that mean? I started to feel uncomfortable. She looked at me almost coyly. Then she turned to the squat man.

‘Simon, I think I’ll pack up now. I have a visitor.’ He showed no sign that he had heard her. She took a shabby coat from a hook.

‘Will you be late tonight?’ she asked him. Simon grumbled some unintelligible reply. Was this Simon whom George and Leonard had met? Simon the mountaineer? He looked most unlike a mountaineer. Who the hell was he then? Her boss? Husband? Lover? Lipschitz – the Master Jeweller? Or was she Lipschitz, the Master Jeweller? That seemed most unlikely. Riva nodded to me to follow. I did so as there was no alternative. Outside it was dark already.

'I live two blocks down. Come along and have some tea.' She did not wait for a reply but began walking briskly, taking long strides. I followed as best I could half a pace behind.

'Walk next to me,' she almost commanded. I did so. Why was I going with her? The last thing I wanted was tea.

'Nasty weather,' she said, 'bad for climbing.' Table Mountain was wrapped in a dark mist. It was obviously ridiculous for anyone to climb at five o'clock on a weekday afternoon in heavy weather like this. Nobody would be crazy enough. Except George perhaps.

'George,' she said as if reading my thoughts. 'George. What was the other one's name?'

'Leonard.'

'Oh yes, Leonard, I haven't seen him since the mountain. How is he getting on?' I was panting to keep up with her. 'I don't see much of them except when we go climbing together. Leonard works in Epping and George is in Bree Street.'

'I know about George.' How the hell did she?

'I've come from his work. I wanted to see him but he hasn't come in today.'

'Yes, I knew he wouldn't be in. So you came to see me instead? I somehow knew that one day you would put in an appearance.'

How the hell did she know? Was she in contact with George? I remained quiet, out of breath with the effort of keeping up with her. What on earth made me go into the shop of Lipschitz – Master Jeweller? Who the hell was Lipschitz – Master Jeweller?

The conversation had stopped. She continued the brisk pace, taking her fast, incongruous strides. Like stepping from rock to rock up Blinkwater Ravine, or Babi Yar.

'Here we are.' She stopped abruptly in front of an old triple-storied Victorian building with brown paint peeling off its walls. On the upper floors were wide balconies ringed with wrought-iron gates. The main entrance was cluttered with spilling refuse bins.

'I'm on the first floor.'

We mounted a rickety staircase, then a landing and a long, dark passage lit at intervals by a solitary electric bulb. All the doors, where these could be made out, looked alike. Riva stopped before one and rummaged in her bag for a key. Next to the door was a cat litter smelling sharply. The same cat?

'Here we are.' She unlocked the door, entered and switched on a light. I was hesitant about following her inside.

'It's quite safe, I won't rape you,' she snorted. This was a coarse remark. I waited for her to laugh but she did not. I entered,

blinking my eyes. Large, high-ceilinged, cavernous bed-sitter with a kitchen and toilet running off it. The room was gloomy and dusty. A double-bed, round table, two uncomfortable-looking chairs and a dressing table covered with bric-a-brac. There was a heavy smell of mildew permeating everything. The whole building smelt of mildew. Why a double-bed? For her alone or Simon and herself?

'You live here?' It was a silly question and I knew it. I wanted to ask 'You live here alone or does Simon live here also?' Why should I bother about Simon?

'Yes, I live here. Have a seat. The bed's more comfortable to sit on.' I chose one of the chairs. It creaked as I settled into it. All the furniture must have been bought from second-hand junk shops. Or maybe it came with the room. Nothing was modern. Jewish, Victorian, or what I imagined Jewish Victorian to be. Dickensian in a sort of decaying nineteenth century way. Riva took off her coat. She was all bustle.

'Let's have some tea. I'll put on the water.' Before I could refuse she disappeared into the kitchen. I must leave now. The surroundings were far too depressing. Riva was far too depressing. I remained as if glued to my seat. She reappeared. Now to make my apologies. I spoke as delicately as I could, but it came out all wrongly.

'I'm very sorry, but I won't be able to stay for tea. You see, I really can't stay. I must get home. I have lots of work to do. An exam tomorrow. Social Anthropology.'

'The trouble with you, Professor, is that you are far too clever, but not clever enough.' She sounded annoyed. 'Maybe you work too hard, far too hard. Have some tea before you go.' There was a twinkle in her eye again. 'Or are you afraid of me?'

I held my breath, expecting her to laugh but she did not. A long pause.

'No,' I said at last. 'No, I'm not afraid of you. I really do have an exam tomorrow. You must believe me. I was on my way home. I was hoping to see George.'

'Yes, I know, and he wasn't at work. You've said so before.'

'I really must leave now.'

'Without first having tea? That would be anti-social. An intellectual like you should know that.'

'But I don't want any tea, thanks.' The conversation was going around in meaningless circles. Why the hell could I not go if I wished to?

'You really are afraid of me. I can see that.'

'I must go.'

'And not have tea with the queen? Is it because I'm white? Or Jewish? Or because I live in a room like this?'

I wanted to say 'It's because you're you. Why can't you leave me alone?' I got up determined to leave.

'Why did you come with me in the first place?'

This was an unfair question. I had not asked to come along. There was a hiss from the kitchen where the water was boiling over onto the plate.

'I don't know why I came. Maybe it was because you asked me.'

'You could have refused.'

'I tried to.'

'But not hard enough.'

'Look, I'm going now. I have overstayed my time.'

'Just a second.' She disappeared into the kitchen. I could hear her switching off the stove then the clinking of cups. I stood at the door waiting for her to appear before leaving.

She entered with a tray containing the tea things and a plate with some assorted biscuits.

'No thank you,' I said determined that nothing would keep me, 'I said I was leaving and I am.'

She put the tray on the table. 'Alright then, Professor. If you must then you must. Don't let me keep you any longer.' She looked almost pathetic that moment, staring dejectedly at the tray. This was not the Riva I knew. She was straining to control herself. I felt dirty, sordid, sorry for her.

'Goodbye,' I said hastily and hurried out into the passage. I bumped into someone. Simon looked up surprised, then mumbled some excuse. He looked at me puzzled and then entered the room.

As I swiftly ran down the stairs I heard her snorting. Short pause and then peals of uncontrolled laughter. I stumbled out into Long Street.

Man Against Himself

Joel Matlou

We must work before the sun goes down. The life of a man is very heavy in his bones and his future is a deep unknown grave. One day when I was alone, struggling to get money, and far away from my home where no one lives or grows, I met a man from Zululand called Dlongolo. He told me to try for work at the offices of Rustenburg Platinum Mine (R.P.M.) in Bleskop, 8 km from where I was living.

The following day I went to the offices of R.P.M. I found work. The man who hires labourers was a black man with three missing upper teeth. I was told to come on Monday. Before I left the premises I saw the sportsground, the mine hospital, a bar, a café, trucks, vans, buses and a compound with many rooms and toilets. But I left because I was sleeping at the hostel in Rustenburg and my home was in Mabopane, Odi.

On Monday morning I returned to the offices with others. At about 9.30 a.m. our passes were taken and looked into. They told me to fill in the forms they gave me in Ga-Rankuwa. So, with the little money that I had, I arrived in Ga-Rankuwa and my forms were filled in, but I was surprised when they told me to pay R1 for the forms. I paid it and left. So I was short of money for the train back to Rustenburg. I had only 85 cents in my pocket, and the journey would cost R1,10. It was 9.30 a.m. and the train left Ga-Rankuwa at 10.00 a.m. I was far from the station and I lost hope of catching the train. I thought of begging for money, but decided I was too young to beg.

My second plan was that I should sleep somewhere in Ga-Rankuwa and at about 4 a.m. I would walk to the station of Wolhuterskop where my 85 cents would be enough for the train. At about 8 p.m. I chose myself a toilet to sleep in at a certain school in Ga-Rankuwa, Zone 4. I went into the toilet at night but it was very dark inside. There were lights all over Ga-Rankuwa roads. I walked slowly to the back of the toilets where I found a big stone. I sat on it trying not to think of dangerous snakes under the stone. At midnight I heard barking dogs. All the people in Ga-Rankuwa were asleep. At about 3 a.m. I heard cars hooting all over Ga-Rankuwa. I thought I was in danger. But those cars belonged to newspapers and were calling for their employees. And there were two buses hooting. I thought they were staff buses for drivers.

People started to walk on the roads then, to catch trains and buses to Pretoria and Rosslyn. At about 5.15 a.m. I felt cold. I was wearing a shirt, a jersey, trousers, and shoes without socks. The sun rose and I left Ga-Rankuwa early so that I could catch the 11.30 a.m. train at Wolhuterskop. I ran until De Wild where I started to walk and beg a lift to Brits or Rustenburg.

On the road to Brits I saw a black man sitting on the white government stone indicating bridges. I greeted him and he greeted me. As I passed he called, and stood up. He begged 20 cents from me. With shame I told him my story and showed him the forms I'd filled out in Ga-Rankuwa. He was wearing sandals, black trousers, a red 'hemp', a black jersey and a scarf. He had a camera in his hand. I continued to tell him my story. I told him to beg a lift to Brits, where he was going. A truck carrying sand arrived and we stopped it for a lift. The driver took us to Brits. We got off at the bus rank. He asked me to accompany him to the pass office for a reference book. At the pass office we saw convicts cutting grass and sweeping the pass office floors. He was given a duplicate and we departed.

I started to run through the town until I was outside Brits. The station of Wolhuterskop was very far and there were no short cuts so I used the main roads, like a car. I was tired and felt like a convict on the run. I could not imagine what was going to happen. My stomach was empty. As I was walking on the tar road I met two beautiful girls aged about 18 to 20. I am 23. They were carrying boxes with dirty dust-coats inside. I greeted them and asked for the Wolhuterskop station. One of the girls, speaking Pedi, told me that it was not so far away. The second girl asked where I was from. I told her that our factory van broke down near Brits, and I was reporting back to work. She asked where I worked and I told her at the United Tobacco Company in Rustenburg, about which I knew nothing really. We parted. Not far from the station I met a traffic inspector resting under the plantation trees. He greeted me nicely and I also accepted his greetings. I thought to myself that my road was now open because I had got a greeting from a white traffic inspector. That was nearly true and nearly false because I could never have imagined what was going to happen after my struggles. At the station there was a queue for tickets. My ticket cost 75 cents to Bleskop where Rustenburg Platinum Mine offices are, so I had 10 cents left. I bought myself a half brown bread costing 7 cents at the nearest café, and sat under the trees on the grass where I ate the bread alone. I drank some water and

my stomach was full like a strong man. The train arrived, so I boarded it but my mind and future were still missing without hopes. My heart was very heavy as I got onto the train so I thought of my motto: 'If the Lord gives you a burden, he will also provide help to carry it, and in the whole world there are so many people who pray for a new life.'

When I arrived at Bleskop I wondered where I would sleep that night. I just took a stroll until 7.30 p.m., back to Bleskop station. There were a few people going home from the mines. And I started to breathe softly without fearing. There was a big waiting room in which many people were asleep and I too slept there. People from the mines were playing records with their gumba-gumba. Bleskop was very quiet but gumba-gumba men were blasting records the whole night until 2.30 in the morning, when they boarded the Pretoria train. I was left with the others who were going to the mines the next day.

After the gumba-gumba men left, Bleskop station became quiet. When the sun rose over the mountains of Pretoria, we set off for the Rustenburg Platinum Mine, some wearing blankets. The mine was where we were going to buy our lives with blasted rocks.

We arrived at the offices which were still closed, and sat on the grass. Mine people were training on the sportsground. Some were jumping and singing in the mine hall in the mine language, 'sefanagalo'. At 7.30 a.m. the ambulance arrived at high speed, its top lamp flashing. It stopped near the door of the mine hospital. Two people and the driver got out without speaking. Their faces were in sorrow. From the back came six people in mine clothes, with their head lamps still on. They off-loaded two coffins and carried them into the mine hospital. I shivered like the branches of a tree. My motto was still in my mind but I thought that I had seen Mabopane for the last time, and my parents, relatives and friends too.

At 8 a.m. the offices opened. We were called and our passes were taken from us. At 9 a.m. we collected our passes and the black officer told us that there was work at Swartklip. They gave us tickets to Swartklip which cost R1,35 single.

When we arrived at Swartklip we were shown to empty rooms and given plates for food. Then we saw a film which ended at 10.00 p.m. Back in our rooms we slept well, with police guarding us with kieries.

On Friday morning the man known as Induna woke us at 5 a.m. He told us to report at the labour office as soon as possible. We

did so. At the labour office our passes were taken. At about 9.30 a.m. a black man in white clothes told us to follow him. We were led to a big house with many rooms and beds, which looked like a hospital. We were taken to a room where there was a chair, a desk and a scale ending in 200 kg. There we met another man, all in white, who had many files in his hands, where our names were already written. They told us to undress. We were checked from toes to head for wounds, then weighed. When the doctor produced a big needle and injected us near the heart to kill shocks when we went underground, I felt I was fighting for my dear beautiful life. Late on Friday we returned to the labour offices. We were given three days' tickets for food at the compound and shown a film.

On Sunday at about 7.30 p.m., after my meal, I tried to find an empty tin and get a little *chaechae*, which is what *mageu* is called on the mines. 'Joel! Joel Matlou!' someone called out to me. I looked at the people sleeping on the grass, and saw a man with a tape recorder. 'Come here, come here,' he said. I moved slowly towards him. He stood up and said, 'Joel, what do you want here?' When I recognised him I was so happy that I kissed him. It was Joseph Masilo of Mabopane who was now living in Moruleng, Rustenburg. We were at school together at Ratshetlho Higher Primary in Mabopane seven years ago. We started questioning one another about our reasons for being on the mine. I told him I had taken the job because I needed money fast, to pay off a big instalment.

'How do you come here?' I asked him.

'Suffering brought me,' he said. 'In two weeks' time I complete my ticket and get paid.'

'Couldn't your people or relatives and friends help you settle your accounts?' I asked.

'It is difficult to reach relatives and friends. Are you married?'

'No,' I replied. 'I will think first before I marry. Mines do not have girls. Where and how often do you get to have a girl near you here at mines?'

'This place is a jail,' said Joseph. 'No girls around here and you must have respect for yourself until your sentence is finished. Stop asking me silly questions. All the people here have troubles.'

We parted and arranged to meet the following day.

I was so very happy to meet my best friend after seven years. My heart was open and all things were going well.

On Monday morning we went to the labour offices. There were three compounds, A, B and C. A compound is called Union

Section. B is called Entabeni and C is called Hlatini. They are far away from each other. The officer told us we would be transferred to C compound, Hlatini. We fetched all our belongings and the mine bus took us to Hlatini compound. There were many people in Hlatini. Some were drinking beers, playing ball, running and playing tape recorders. A big man with a bald head took us to a room called 'School Mine'. In that room we found chairs and a big white board. We were told to sit down quietly and listen. Then all the windows and doors of the room were closed. We were shown a television film of a man teaching new labourers how to build and pack wood and another film on First Aid.

Then a black man wearing a black dust-coat, with a missing left eye, called us to the office. He gave us cards, then called us one by one to take boots, belts and iron (copper) hats. Then we were given numbers. A young man came running with a plastic bag containing small numbers. The numbers were on small pieces of iron 200 mm long and 100 mm wide. My number was 3281. That was on Tuesday.

There were 20 little windows, like those at which people buy tickets for buses or trains. There you got your lamp and battery for work when you produced your number. My number was 3281, and my window number was 8. We were told to report at the windows at 6 a.m. for work.

Back at the compound we enjoyed our mine meal, saw a film and went to sleep. At 5 a.m. we were woken by a loudspeaker. We got our lamp and battery and were taken to a big office where we were ordered to sit down on the floor. We were still to see and learn more.

A white man introduced himself as Mr Alfred Whitefield from Northam, Rustenburg. He spoke English, Tswana and Sefanagalo but not Afrikaans. He said: '*Umtheto wase mine uthi, aikhona wena sebenzisa umlilo lapha kalo mine. Aikhona wena hlala phanzi banye ba sebenza. Vuka umtheto wa boss boy. Sebenzisa a ma toilets a se mine. Aikhona choncha. Sebenzisa umine Bank ku beka imali yakho.*' Those were the words which I still remember from Mr A. Whitefield.

Before we went to work under the soil of Africa, we were given a hand belt with a number on it. It was a blue belt. My number was 2256731.

At 7.15 a.m. the boss boy took us to the lift. As it went down my ears went dead and I saw dark and light as we passed other levels. The levels go from 6 to 31. The lift stopped at 28 level.

There I saw lights, small trains (*makalanyane*), a tool room, a work shop, toilets, a power station, big pipes, drinking water, a telephone and so on.

The boss boy gave us a small book which had 24 pages. Every day he tore out one page from it. When it was empty you get your pay and a new book.

We gave our tickets to the boss boy then walked for one hour to the end of the shaft. The mine shaft was very hot. I was wearing a shirt and trousers. The sweat ran off me like water. There were three tunnels. The small trains, the *makalanyane*, had red lights on the back and front indicating danger. Before the blasting, small holes were drilled in the walls and a man referred to as a *chessaboy* put explosives into them. After the blasting we found broken pipes, the ventilator on the ground, bent rails, a cracked wall and other damage. The blast gave us heavy work. The *makalanyane* and its trucks were called to collect all stones. You can find a stone weighing 200 kg far from the blast.

A Zulu from King William's Town was digging *mosele* (water concrete) when part of the ventilator fell on him and his left leg was trapped under it. The boss called us and we lifted the ventilator to take out the trapped man. His leg was broken and bloody. Four men carried him to the lift and an ambulance was called.

Water leaked from the top of the walls. Sometimes small stones fell on us. In another section of the tunnel were people called Loaders (*Malaisha*). My boots were full of water. The time for clocking out started to roll round, so we followed our boss boy to the station. We switched off our lamps while we waited in the queue because at the station there were electric lights. We were wet like fishes and ugly like hippos. Some were sitting and resting with empty stomachs. There were two lifts running up and down, taking people out of the shaft. When one was underground, the other was on the surface, off-loading. After 20 minutes, the lift arrived. The guard opened the door and we flowed in. The notice on the door said the lift took only 20 people. But we were packed like fishes in a small can. At level 6 the guard opened the door and we came out, one by one, as the door is very small. We gave our officer the lamps and he gave us back our numbers.

There was no time or chance to prove yourself: who you are and what you want. I did not wash my clothes or bath because I did not have soap and other clothes to put on. All I did was eat and sleep on the grass and listen to the music from the loudspeaker at

the offices of Hlatini compound (C).

I had already lost hope of going back to Pretoria where I belonged. I could not even imagine that my girlfriend was thinking about me. Life was so bad; for me life was a little piece of stone. Washing, bathing, cutting nails, dressing in clean clothes and reading newspapers was far from me. It could be about 640 000 miles far from me.

The mine injection makes you forget about your parents, relatives and friends, even your girlfriend. The injection makes you think only about work underground. After three weeks underground I was part of that world.

In the yard of Hlatini compound there was coal and wood and in the rooms was only one stove. If it was cold you could make a fire or cook your own favourite food. The bar and shop were in the yard.

The days went on and on until my ticket said 23 days. Our month ends on day 24. Then we'd get our money. When my ticket said 24 days, I was working underground for the last time. My last day underground went so fast. On the 25th day I went to the paymaster to get my money. I was told to come back after 6 days. This was bad news. Waiting for my 6 days to end, I slept in the bush every night because I did not want to go underground. My main wish was to escape. During my last 6 days in the lonely bush I came across many dead cattle killed by Pondos and Basothos because these nations like meat. I also saw old shafts and old machines, so I used to enjoy myself going underground using ropes and chains. The shafts were very dark. During my wanderings I saw people ploughing their lands and growing crops. I also came across a slum known as Mantserre near the big mountain, far from the Hlatini compound, where there were schools, shops and churches. In the bush I met some wild animals like springboks, hares and impalas, as well as partridges. I even met people riding bicycles from the mines to Mantserre slum on the narrow paths.

I wore my mine clothes during this time as I didn't want to show people that I wasn't working. When I returned to the mine I took off my mine clothes and wore my own dirty ones. I was so happy to know that tomorrow was pay day. I met young men at Hlatini playing records and singing. I joined in though I didn't know them. My meal was so good that I ate like a pig and drank *chaechae* like a drunkard. What I did not know was that I was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. My last night at Hlatini was very long

and terrible. It harboured demons, but it also symbolised escape from dangerous falling rocks to the gentle air of Pretoria City.

At 3.30 a.m. a loudspeaker woke up the people as usual. I was left alone in the room, waiting for 9 a.m., for my pay. I decided to steal clothes, tape recorders and radios but God refused to allow it. Music was playing on the loudspeakers. To me things seemed to be changing; even the birds were singing a chorus which I didn't understand. The hours went by and at 8.30 a.m. people started to queue for pay. I joined them. After an hour the paymaster arrived, police guarding him with revolvers. Each of us was asked for a number, and fingerprints were taken. They gave me a pay slip which had two parts. At a second window they took one part and I was left with the pay slip with my thumb print on it. At the third window they took my pay slip and gave me the money which a policeman counted so that they would not rob me. The money was ninety-six rand. It was for my own work. I risked my life and reason for it.

I went out of the main gates at Hlatini to escape to Northam station. I pretended to be counting my money at the gate so that the police guards would not realise that I was running away. I did not finish counting: I just thrust it into my empty pocket and walked out of the main gate towards the bush to free myself. That time life was not endless but everlasting. The earth was once supposed to be flat. Well, so it is, from Hlatini to Northam. That fact does not prevent science from proving that the earth as a whole is spherical. We are still at the stage that life itself is flat – the distance from birth to death. Yet the probability is that life, too, is spherical and much more extensive and capacious than the hemisphere we know.

The black dots in my eyes turned brown, like a dagga smoker or a dreamer. I felt like a political asylum-seeker, running to Tanzania. To get to Northam I had to cross two compounds. I ran like hell until I crossed A and B compounds. Then I ran to catch the 10.30 train from Northam to Rustenburg. Two black men and a white man on a tractor looked at me, surprised. Far from the ploughing men I crossed a ditch in which a half-eaten impala lay. Birds were singing, animals roaring. At 8 p.m. cars passed me, one after another and I started to fear for my life. I hid under small bridges or in the long grass. At 9 p.m. I saw small yellow lights and I realised that it must be the station. My feet were aching and swollen and bloody.

At the station there was a café where I bought chips and a half

brown and sat on the grass to eat it. After buying a ticket to Rustenburg, I found a small piece of paper on the grass. I took it to the toilets, wet it and washed my face with it. I even bought vaseline to smear on my dirty face. My face looked like that of a real man, but not my clothes.

The train arrived at 10.30 p.m. People looked at me. Some of them were laughing instead of crying blood. After I arrived in Rustenburg I went to the shops. People were laughing at my dirty clothes, even white people. The shopkeeper thought I was a robber, so I showed him my pay slip. I bought a three-piece suit, a blue shirt, black and red socks and a Scotch tie. It cost me seventy-one rand and I was left with only twenty-two rand. I couldn't arrive home with dirty clothes, so I decided to buy my pride with my suffering.

I changed my clothes at the Rustenburg station toilets and put the old ones in a paper bag. I was really a gentleman. People, mostly girls, asked for the time when they saw me, just for pleasure. I had a *Rand Daily Mail* newspaper in my right hand, and walked like a president. I was smelling of new clothes.

Suffering taught me many things.

I recall a poem which is a plea for me:

*I don't like being told
This is in my heart, thinking
That I shall be me
If I were you
I but not you
But you will not give me a chance
I am not you
Yet you will not let me be
You meddle, interfere in my affairs as if they were yours
And you were not me
You are unfair, unwise
That I can be you, talk act and think like you
God made me
For God's sake, let me be me
I see your eyes but you don't see your eyes
I cannot count your fingers because you see them all
Act yourself and I will act myself, not being told but doing it
oneself.*

Suffering takes a man from known places to unknown places. Without suffering you are not a man. You will never suffer for the

second time because you have learned to suffer.

I am grateful to Mr Dlongolo who told me about mine work and that it was a fast way of making money.

It was Friday and most of the people on the train were students and mineworkers going home to Pretoria and the Transkei. Everyone was happy. Even I was happy. If suffering means happiness I am happy. The 1.35 p.m. train pulled out and I sat reading the *Rand Daily Mail*. The train stopped at all stations: Colombia, Turfground, Maroelakop, Bleskop, Marikana, Wolhuterskop, Brits West, Beestekraal, Norite, Stephanus and Tailardshoop, when it left the Republic of Bophuthatswana and crossed into South Africa. On the train people sold watches, apples, socks, liquor, shoe laces, lip ice and so on. When I saw the beautiful girls I thought of my own beautiful sweetheart, my bird of Africa, sea water, razor: green-coloured eyes like a snake, high wooden shoes like a cripple; with soft and beautiful skin, smelling of powder under her armpits like a small child, with black boots for winter like a soldier, and a beautiful figure like she does not eat, sleep, speak or become hungry. And she looks like an artificial girl or electric girl. But she was born of her parents, as I was. She is Miss Johanna Mapula Modise of Mabopane who was born during a rainy day. As I am Mr Joel Medupe Matlou of Mabopane and I was also born during a rainy day. Mapula and Medupe is our gift from God. So, we accepted these names by living together.

The train arrived in Ga-Rankuwa on time. I bought some groceries and took a taxi to Mabopane. From there I went straight home where I met my mother and young brothers. They were happy and I was happy with them. The following morning I visited my girlfriend.

She cried when she saw me, silently looking down on the soil of Africa. I did not tell her I had worked on the mine. I said I had got a job in Johannesburg.

'Why didn't you tell me that you were going to work in Johannesburg? You didn't even write to me. You just sat there and forgot me,' she said.

'One of my friends took me to Johannesburg where he found me work. So there was no chance, I just left,' I lied to her.

Back on Mabopane's dusty roads again I looked like a real gentleman. Many people were happy to visit me as they knew I was a peace lover and didn't drink or smoke. There was nothing which worried me. I had thought that getting back to Mabopane's

dusty roads would lead me to suffer, but eating alone was almost more than I could bear. I learned to forget yesterdays and to think of tomorrows. Each morning in the township, I said to myself: 'Today is a new life.' I overcame my fear of loneliness and my fear of want. I am happy and fairly successful now and have a lot of enthusiasm and love for life. I know now that I shall never again be afraid of sleeping under a tree alone, regardless of what life hands me. I don't have to fear blasting. I know now that I can live one day at a time and that every day is a time for a wise man.



Lionel Davis *The Fat of the Land*

Ngwana wa Azania

A Film Concept

Mothobi Mutloatse

This film has to be shot on location as much as possible, and the musical score shall be regarded as an integral rather than minor part of this herculean task portraying the lot, or is it heap, of the black child Azania, on celluloid. It will definitely not be an intellectual nor fancy exercise: in fact, some or most of the participants will have to volunteer to go through hell first before agreeing to make their contributions, because basically making a film documentary even on a small aspect of the black man is sheer agony. One cannot feign pain, it has to be felt again to put that stamp of authenticity on any documentary, seeing we have no archives to refer to. Again, much of the documentary's success will depend on imagination, improvisation and the artistry of all those involved in this project. The director — at least the bum who decides to take up this seemingly impractical proposition — will have to be a strong, patient, open-minded, non-commercial, un-technical artist. He will be expected to do casting himself from the camera-man up to the last 'extra'. He will have to read the synopsis, which in many ways is also the shooting script, to everybody at a discussion meeting where, naturally, he will have to be grilled by everybody. Suggestions, deletions, additions or even alterations to the synopsis will have to be made. Concerning the musical score, all the musicians will be required to give their own interpretations of how they view the project, and thereafter agree on the score.

- The future of the black child, the recalcitrant Azanian child in South Africa, is as bright as night and this child, forever uprooted, shall grow into a big sitting duck for the uniformed gunslinger.
- From ages two to four he shall ponder over whiteness and its intrigue. From ages five to eight he shall prise open his jacket-like ears and eyes to the stark realisation of his proud skin of ebony. From ages nine to fifteen he shall harden into an aggressive victim of brainbashing and yet prevail. From ages sixteen to twenty-one he shall eventually graduate from a wavering township candle into a flickering life-prisoner of hate and revenge and hate in endless fury. This motherchild shall be

crippled mentally and physically for experimental purposes by concerned quack statesmen parading as philanthropists.

- This motherchild shall be protected and educated free of state subsidy in an enterprising private business asylum by Mr Nobody. This motherchild shall mother the fatherless thousands and father boldly the motherless million pariahs. This nkgonochild shall recall seasons of greed and injustice to her war-triumphant and liberated Azachilds. This mkhuluchild shall pipesmoke in the peace and tranquillity of liberation, and this landchild of the earth shall never be carved up ravenously again and the free and the wild and the proud shall but live together in their original own unrestricted domain without fear of one another, and this waterchild shall gaily bear its load without a fuss like any other happy mother after many suns and moons of fruitlessness in diabolical inhumanity.
- This gamble-child of zwêpe shall spin coins with his own delicate life to win the spoils of struggle that is life itself. This child of despair shall shit in the kitchen; shit in the lounge; shit in the bedroom-cum-lounge-cum-kitchen; he shall shit himself dead; and shall shit everybody as well in solidarity and in his old-age shall dump his shit legacy for the benefit of his granny-childs: this very ngwana of redemptive suffering; this umtwana shall but revel in revealing offbeat, creative, original graffiti sugar-coated with sweet nothings like:

re tlaa ba etsa power/re-lease Mandela/azikhwelwa at all costs/we shall not kneel down to white power/release Sisulu/jo' ma se moer/black power will be back tonight/release or charge all detainees/msunuwakho/down with booze/Mashinini is going to be back with a bang/to bloody hell with bantu education/don't shoot — we are not fighting/Azania eyethu/masende akho/majority is coming soon/freedom does not walk it sprints/inkululeko ngoku!
- This child born in a never-ending war situation shall play marbles seasonably with TNTs and knife nearly everyone in sight in the neighbourhood for touch and feel with reality, this child of an insane and degenerate society shall know love of hatred and the eager teeth of specially-trained biting dogs and he will speak animatedly of love and rage under the influence of glue and resistance.
- This marathon child shall trudge barefooted, thousands of kilometres through icy and windy and stormy and rainy days and nights to and from rickety churches-cum-stables-cum-

classrooms with bloated tummy to strengthen him for urban work and toil in the gold mines, the diamond mines, the coal mines, the platinum mines, the uranium mines so that he should survive countless weekly rockfalls, pipe bursts, and traditional faction fights over a meal of maiza that has been recommended for family planning.

- This child of raw indecision and experimentation shall sell newspapers from street corners and between fast moving cars for a dear living breadwinning instead of learning about life in free and compulsory school, and shall provide the capitalistic country with the cheapest form of slavery the labourglobe has ever known and the governor of the reserve bank shall reward him with a thanks-for-nothing-thanks-for-enriching-the-rich kick in the arse for having flattened inflation alone hands-down.
- This child of the tunnels shall occasionally sleep malunde for an on-the-spot research into the effects of legalised separation of families and he shall find his migrant long-lost father during a knife-duel in a men's hostel and his domestic mother shall he ultimately embrace passionately in a cul de sac in dikitchening in a gang-bang.
- This child of concrete shall record and computerise how the boss shouts and swears publicly at his heroically shy father-boy and how the madam arrogantly sends his mother-girl from pillar to bust. He shall photograph how the superior doctor addresses his unkempt mother in untailored talk as if mother-stupid had conceived a baboon-child.
- This observant child shall taste its first balanced meal in an i.c.u., and in the very intensive care unit shall he be revived to further life and misery and malnutrition in this immensely-wealthy land to loosen up the bones down to their perforated marrow.
- This child of the donga shall watch in jubilation and ecstasy and ire as its godforsaken, god-given home called squatter camp is razed through its permission down to the ground by demolishing bulldozers lately referred to as front-enders.
- This child of nowhere shall of his own free will join the bandwagon and ravaza its own Botshabelo to lighten the merciless soil conservationists' burden for a place in the sun of uncertainty, he shall show absolute respect for his elders with a hard kierie blow across the grey head and shall be unanimously nominated for a nobel peace prize for his untold, numerous contributions to human science at a local mortuary.

- This child born into a callous and too individualistically-selfish society shall be considered sane until further notice by psychopaths masquerading as men of law. He shall be an unmatched hero with an undecided following, having paralysed parents and preachers alike with his frankness and willingness not only to whisper nor speak about wanting to be free but to bloody well move mountains to be free!
- This child of evictions shall sleep in toilets while its offspring cross the borders for possible m.t.
- This child of rags to rags and more rags to riches school uniform tatters shall quench his thirst with dishwater in the suburbs and with methylated spirits in the deadendstreet camps to communicate with the gods.
- This child shall breast-feed her first baby before her seventeenth birthday and be highly pleased with motherhood lacking essential fatherhood. This child of uneasiness shall trust nobody, believe in no one, even himself, except perhaps when he's sober. This ghettochild shall excel in the pipi-olympics with gold and bronze medals in raping grannies with every wayward erection and eviction from home resulting from ntate's chronic unemployment and inability to pay the hovel rent.
- This growing child of the kindergarten shall psychologically avoid a school uniform admired telegraphically by uniformed gunfighters of maintenance of chaos and supremacy. He shall smother moderation goodbye and throttle reason in one hell of a fell swoop, and the whole scheming world shall cheer him up to the winning post with its courage in the mud and its heart in its pink arse. This child of dissipation shall loiter in the shebeen in earnest search for its parents and shall be battered and abused to hell and gone by its roving parents when reunited in frustration in an alleyway.
- This child of bastardised society and bastard people-in-high-office and colour-obsession and paranoid of communism and humanism, shall break through and snap the chain of repression with its bare hands, and this child, with its rotten background and slightly bleak future shall however liberate this nuclear crazy world with Nkulunkulu's greatest gift to man: ubuntu.
- This lambschild shall remind the nation of the oft-remembered but never used ISINTU:

Mangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng.

Two-Dimensional

Ahmed Essop

Anil, a former pupil, came to live in my street in Lenasia. I would see him some mornings from my lounge window, going to the bus-stop. He was still a good-looking youth, though his face had lost its schoolboyish softness. His complexion was a burnt bronze; his hair carbon black. His lean body seemed to have remained a physical constant. At school, in Newtown, Anil had been a quiet and reserved boy, performing his academic work dutifully rather than with any relish. He sat at the back of the classroom, withdrawing himself into the limbo of virtual non-identity. As a consequence, he had never received the attention that other pupils, more alert and extrovertly vocal, had received. Yet in the fluid glitter of his dark eyes one saw a sensitive youth, an impression amplified when he responded to oral questions by the mellifluous cadence of his voice. Once he played a strange trick that earned him a brief period of notoriety. He left a note on his desk which said that by the time it was read he would be 'dead among the reeds in the Zoo Lake'. Everyone searched frantically for him for two days — his family distraught with anxiety and worry — but he was nowhere to be found. He reappeared on the third morning and refused to answer any questions. However, the relief felt at his reappearance quickly erased the memory of the incident. At the end of the year he matriculated with a second class pass and left school.

One day I met Anil in the street. I asked him what work he was doing. He told me that he was a clerk for a stock-broker and that much of his time was spent at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

'The work must be interesting.'

'Like hell!' he snarled.

'Why?'

'I feel I am a robot, a nobody.'

'Sure...'

'You don't understand. I am just a machine doing all the dirty work for the white capitalists.'

I was astonished, hardly prepared for the sharp indictment from someone who had been so reticent.

'Well, I am sure you are learning something.'

'Learning? If you can call working with bandits learning.'

'I suppose you have a living to make.'

'You know, after I left school I went to Wits University to do a B.A. I left half way.'

'You left?'

'How I hated the place! You should see those white liberal morons. They rig a few protest placards and go on parade like zombies. Afterwards they crawl back into their pleasure domes.'

Later, after we had parted, I thought about what Anil had said. I felt unconvinced that he had left the university for the reason he had given. There was restlessness within him, confusion, morbid hate for others as well as for himself. I recalled the suicide incident at school and realised that though at that time it had been dismissed as some sort of schoolboy prank, it had been a desperate egotistical act to focus attention on himself. But more seriously it suggested a tendency to irrational behaviour rooted in psychological imbalance. Now, I wondered whether the break in his studies was not the result of his insecure psyche, or whether it had been the result of some traumatic experience.

Anil was seated in the university library when he first saw her. She was about three tables away, head bowed over her book, her blond hair falling on either side. He looked at her for a few minutes, taking delight in his surreptitious survey. His eyes shifted from her head to her breasts gently thrusting against a white blouse, then focused below the table where her hands lay clasped in her lap. Suddenly his entire consciousness was sensually ignited: her clasped hands symbolic of the erotic paradise she could offer him. She looked up at him as though she had caught him in some act of guilt. He rose quickly from his chair, turned towards a shelf without looking at the title. When he sat down and glanced at her table she had vanished. Impulsively he hurried out of the library in search of her.

He stopped in the colonnaded porch outside. She was standing beside a column, looking for something in her handbag, the sunlight playing on her beauty that exceeded Anil's first impression. From the waist down, her lithe body asserted itself through a close-fitting marine-blue skirt. His veins yeasty, surcharged, he could not move. She looked up at him.

'Tired of studying?' she asked.

'Yes,' he answered, feebly.

'You are doing Arts, aren't you?'

'Yes,' he said, staring like a visionary.

'Goodbye. See you again.'

Her words failed to strike his aural sense immediately as he watched her go down the steps, walk away hurriedly over the shrub-fringed tarmac and climb a quartet of stone steps that led to the street, but came to him like an echo afterwards.

He sat down on the steps for a while to still the ebullition within him. Suddenly, in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the library, his being's pith seemed to have undergone a mutation: he had become strongly conscious of himself as a sensual being. There were so many girls at the university — they flowered so profusely in its environment — yet never before had he found himself overwhelmed by the impulse and appetite of youthful passion.

From then on he kept a searching eye for her. Between lectures he sought her in corridors, in foyers, in porticos, on campus and in the library. He met her, but the encounters were invariably brief, disjointed spells of academic chit-chat about lectures and courses. On one of these occasions he saw a notebook in her hand. On the cover was her name: Caroline Seymour.

One day she met him as he was rushing to a Milton lecture.

'I was looking for you,' she said. 'We are having a protest demonstration tomorrow....'

She stood close to him as she elaborated. He felt himself drawn into privileged intimacy.

Elated, he hurried to the lecture room. He would meet her the next day and stand alongside her in the protest demonstration. His imagination glowed with the promise of amorous possibilities in the future. The lecture was a failure: Lucifer's agony in hell failed to touch the happy centre of his being.

The next day, punctually, he was at the appointed place. He saw her amidst a crowd of students and went up to her.

'I am so glad you came,' she said, handing him a placard attached to a broomstick. The placard screamed in vermilion: 'We hate dictators!'

The students paraded on campus and then moved in procession to a busy street on the university's boundary. Anil looked for Caroline, but she had moved ahead of him. The students lined the pavement and displayed their placards to pedestrians and motorists: some looked indifferently at them, others smiled, some glared and a few made obscene gestures. One spat and shouted: 'Red!' The police arrived with Alsatian dogs and stood on the opposite pavement.

Anil saw Caroline on his right, holding a placard. For two happy

hours he stood there, conscious of her and of his identification with her in the protest. Then the demonstration broke up. He looked for her to give her the placard, but she had disappeared. He was left alone, the placard in his hand.

One evening Anil came to visit me. After some amiable talk, I said to him, 'I have been thinking about what you said when we last met. Don't you think it's unreasonable to condemn all the students at Wits University?'

'Unreasonable? What do you mean?'

'Surely some students are sincere in their political commitment.'

'Sincere? To you, yes, because you have been brainwashed.'

'Brainwashed?'

'Yes, by white thought and white culture.'

Shocked by the allegation I did not reply.

'What did you and the others teach us at school,' he went on, 'but everything about whites — their language, their history, their science. The whites are your gods. But not for long, I am warning you. We are going to destroy them.'

I intended to protest that I did not prescribe the curriculum, but asked instead:

'Who is "we"?''

'We the oppressed. We shall destroy the white morons.'

Anil was sitting in an armchair, his face changed into a scowling mask.

'Why are you working at the white Stock Exchange?' I asked.

'Because *you* are not working there does not mean you are with us,' he answered evasively.

He placed his elbows on his knees and looked broodingly at the patterned carpet, his mind captive to something implacably calcified in his memory.

'Anil, I think you should go on with your studies privately,' I said.

'I don't want a worthless Arts degree In any case I am going away.'

'Going away? To Europe?'

'Europe! Whites!'

'Where then?'

He did not answer, but looked at me in bitter contempt and resentment.

'The whites at the Stock Exchange will miss you,' I said in reflex.

His body quivered, his arms tensed vengefully. But he only

looked at me, then rose from the chair and left the house.

Anil was sitting on a bench beside a camelia tree, several terraces separating him from the swimming pool that spread a fluorescent blue haze on everything around. Behind him was the university's small Fine Arts Library and Gallery. He saw a figure in a black swimming costume appear from the ladies' change room and he recognised Caroline at once. He watched her walking up the steps to the diving platform — her bodily grace and definition of form strongly presented in the sunlight — stand poised on the edge for a moment with uplifted arms as though supplicating some swimming pool deity, then plunge. He seemed to plunge with her into the pool and experienced, within the cyclone heart of erotic passion, a self-annihilating orgasmic deluge.

When her head emerged above water, he rose from the bench, afraid that she would see him gazing at her. He hurried towards the Fine Arts Library, hoping to find within its walls something to still the tumult within.

Caroline's body dominated his consciousness as the days passed. Her beauty seemed to enrich his aesthetic vision. The world of trees, shrubs and flowers that edged the campus lawns became a newly discovered reality. He allowed his spirit to be drenched by the colours of flowers as though their beauty flashed out of her body. And he turned with avid greed to the nudes displayed in the art books in the Fine Arts Library: fat palaeolithic goddesses, serene Aphrodites, mellow Venuses.

One morning Anil was standing beside a fountain, looking at the yellow heart of a water-lily, when Caroline came up to him.

Anil looked at her. Suddenly he was seized by an amalgam of weakness, coyness and trepidation. She had come upon him when his attention had been profoundly captured by the miracle of an aquatic bloom emerging from its fluid matrix. Confronted by her presence in a way that was different from the previous meetings, he did not know what to say to her. He knew so little of her, of her interests beyond the university.

'No lectures today,' she asked.

'One only, and it's over,' he said.

'That's why you're idling here,' she said, with laughter glittering in her superb blue eyes. She sat down on the encircling wall of the fountain.

Beginning to feel at ease, joy pulsed through Anil.

'I was on my way home when I stopped for a moment,' he said.

'Where do you live?' she asked.

'In Fordsburg.'

'Do you know Mr Mia? My father had business dealings with him.'

'He is a well-known merchant,' Anil said, visually caressing her body tautly expressed through dark green slacks. 'Would you like to come to Fordsburg?'

'If I get an invitation.'

'Come tomorrow for lunch,' he said, taking pen and paper from his bag and writing his address. 'I must go now,' he said, giving her the paper.

With a wave of his hand he was off, his whole being caught in a lyrical turmoil in which flower, fountain and Caroline's body seemed to melt and fuse.

The next day was Saturday and Caroline went in her small car to Fordsburg. Anil was waiting anxiously for her. He lived with an elder brother and his family.

After lunch Anil took Caroline for a walk through the suburb's streets. Caroline, coming from an affluent suburb of mansions and gardens, was fascinated by the narrow streets, quaint old homes embracing each other, little shops crammed with goods, and the motley crowds. Anil on two occasions, as he escorted her, slipped his hand around her waist, and later when they entered an arcade-like street where fruit, vegetable and flower stalls blazed with colour, daringly attempted to entwine his fingers with Caroline's. Although she gently disentwined hers, he did not feel repulsed. His elation remained high. She had come to visit him and would come again. In fact his belief was soon proved correct when they returned and Caroline accepted an invitation from Anil's brother that she join them on a family outing and picnic on the following Sunday.

On Sunday Caroline arrived and they went by car into the country. They stopped beneath some trees along a river bank. They had lunch. Afterwards, the children, with Caroline joining them, played with a ball in a shallow pool of water hemmed by rocks. She was dressed in denim jeans and a loose lilac blouse. Anil watched her every movement. Later, when she came to sit near him he proposed that he would like to show her an artificial waterfall which was a short distance away. Caroline went with him.

The river bank was thickly wooded, with an undergrowth of ferns and shrubs. They walked along a path, and wherever there was a slope or a jutting stone or a fallen branch in the way, Anil placed his arm protectively around her waist. When they reached the

waterfall they watched the water as it glided over a brick wall like fluid glass and shattered on the rocks below. Anil's entire sensual consciousness was now concentrated in a centrifugal tension seeking release. His hand flew out and drew Caroline towards him. But Caroline, by turning swiftly eluded his grasp, and laughingly saying, 'Come, let's run a race,' ran back along the path they had come.

He stood there in a trance, his ears thundering with the crash of water, his vision darkened by the verdigris of looming trees. Then the reality of what had happened rushed upon him. The cumulative disaster of rejection, defeat, humiliation sunk into him like some bitter sediment. A cry escaped from his lips and he felt himself swept down the waterfall....When he awoke he found himself lying in the grass.

He returned and found everyone playing football on a level stretch of lawn.

For the next three days Anil did not attend university. He stayed in his room, nursing his slashed ego; walked about the streets; visited museums — those huge mausoleums of heavy silence — and looked vacantly at artefacts and relics. When he returned to university, he attended lectures listlessly, racked by the continual presence of Caroline in his consciousness and his desperate wish never to see her again. What would he say to her if he met her? And how would she react to him?

He did not see her for two weeks. Then one day he went to the student cafeteria, bought a glass of milk and was walking towards a table, when he saw Caroline sitting alone in a corner. She waved at him to come over. An agonising struggle of decision, lasting a matchflare, gripped him. Should he go to her? Or should he pretend not to have noticed her, drink his milk quickly and leave? He went towards her.

'I am glad to see you,' she said as he sat down opposite her. 'We are having another demonstration on Friday....'

A rowdy group of students entered the cafeteria and came over to them.

'Hi Caroline! Hi Caroline!' they shouted, bringing chairs to sit near them. Anil recognised several of them; they had been part of the demonstration. One of them put his arm around her shoulders.

'I have just told Anil about the demonstration on Friday,' Caroline said.

'You must be there,' one of the students said.

'Last Friday Caroline and I eloped to Durban in my new sports

car,' the student sitting next to Caroline said, drawing her closer. 'The weather was perfect. We stayed at the Blue Waters Hotel and dined at an Indian restaurant. What was it called...?'

Some of the students looked at Anil.

'Khyber,' Caroline answered, almost touching her partner's ear with her lips.

'The food was super,' the student went on. 'And guess who we met there....?'

Anil felt himself pushed out, negated. He looked at Caroline to rescue him, to say a word, to smile, giving him the assurance that he was still part of her. But she seemed to be receding from him, drawn away by a clasping arm. In an instant he saw her as part of the white liberal caste that indulged in the ritual protest because it was expected of them, only to leave the university later to take their place in a privileged society for which they had been prepared.

'I have a lecture to attend,' he stammered, more to himself than to the group and left hurriedly.

Outside he ran along a pathway towards the street and home. A cry, 'She is a white! She is a white!' flew out of his mouth, stabbing his own ears. The cry, weighted by bitter accusation and the authority of a final revelation, seemed to crack some inner stronghold.

He ran on, his thoughts and feelings webbed, humid and hot. She had betrayed him when he most needed her, when the students had looked upon him as some sort of exotic culinary specimen. She was like the rest of them, nothing authentic about her. She had used him in that pitiful protest masquerade and wanted to use him again. Running under the shadow of a plane tree he saw her naked body in a mirage, against a background of crushed urban dwellings, rising and receding into the sky, drawn away by an encircling arm. His imagination exploded with water as her body — sunlit, ravishingly Circean — plunged into the swimming pool and vanished. He could never reach her. To reach her he had to break a system, shatter a world.

'Caroline! Caroline!' he cried, as a swell of desire rose and surged within him. He stumbled against a jutting pavement slab and fell. He did not get hurt. The physical jolt seemed to shake him out of a nightmare. He walked homewards.

One evening I was having a party at my place when I was told that someone wanted to see me. I went to the door and saw Anil.

'Can I come in?' he asked in an apologetic voice.

'Of course,' I said, hoping the party atmosphere would do him good.

Dancing was going on and Anil sat and watched. After dancing we had refreshments, followed by party talk: local gossip, art, politics and whatever else took our fancy. We came to discussing the ordeal of some twenty men and women who had been arrested and held incommunicado for one year.

'And what have you done about that?' Anil asked loudly.

Everyone looked at him. There was something so embarrassingly intrusive and discordant about the remark that no one dared to ask him what he himself had done.

'The whites have not only conditioned your way of life but your resistance reflexes as well.'

'We are powerless,' said Zinat. She was sitting cross-legged on the carpet, with a plait of hair falling over her left shoulder into her lap.

'And what merit is there in resistance by the strong? In any case, you have been dancing here as though there is nothing rotten in this country. White culture has sapped your will to resist.'

'That's nonsense,' she said.

'Revolt is too much for you — for all of you — because the whites have twisted your minds. Get out, get out into the streets and fight ...! Kill them all...! Fight...!' Anil was screaming hysterically. He rushed to the door and ran out.

Anil lost interest in his studies at the university. He spent most of his time in the small African Studies library which was used by few students.

One day he entered the room and saw Caroline as he turned into an aisle between two rows of book shelves. She was standing at the end which was almost a secluded niche. A student stood beside her. He was looking over her shoulder at an open book in her hand. Then the student placed his arm around her waist. A sliver of pain shot through Anil. He stood rigid, tumult rising within him. He let out a strident scream, took a book from the shelf and flung it at the two lovers who fragmented in his vision into surrealist unreality at the impact. He rushed towards the door and ran out of the building.

I didn't see Anil again for some time. Then one evening he came.

'I have come to say goodbye,' he said. 'I am leaving the country soon.'

I asked him to come in, for several times since the party I had thought of him. It troubled me that a boy I had once taught was deeply unhappy. Calcification had set in within him — due to failure in his studies? a bitter experience? personality disorder? who could say — that neither reason nor compassion could dissolve.

He sat down in a chair and said, 'I suppose you will be glad.'

'Why should I?' He looked at me in a sardonic glancing way, then stared at the carpet with his elbows on his knees.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'That's not important. I want to be free of the whites.'

'Will that bring you happiness?'

He looked at me in bewilderment and with muted rage, as though he had expected me to say something else.

'That's all,' he said rising from the chair and going towards the door. I went to the door and watched him walk away, a solitary silhouette as he passed under a street lamp.

Several months later I received a letter from Dar-es-Salaam. I was puzzled as I knew no one in that city. On opening the letter I saw a series of words boldly and crudely printed in black ink and for some inscrutable reason in mirror script. The letter was a ferociously denunciatory, obscenely abusive attack against 'Herrenvolk dogs and their syphilitic women'.

Jazz

Peter Wilhelm

I had left school and was in my first year at university; eighteen years old, scrabbling around the campus with my bag of books and short-sightedness. Jane was in my English class and we sat near each other. She was very beautiful, a target for the predatory men who stalked women there. But she held aloof, being an intellectual and, for those times, a radical.

Conrad, Lawrence, James: we read these books and wrote papers on them. I struggled, for my background was impoverished; not simply in the cash valuation you could put on it, though that was scant enough: but in the very aridity of the mental climate. I moved in the remotest suburbs of thought. Far away I saw the lights, and was drawn like a moth.

I cannot easily describe Jane. Her hair was blond, she was tanned and 'athletic'. Etcetera. The fact of beauty was there, like a cat in the house: but then I could match that by being handsome in a parodic fashion, and I played all the sports. She would not have been drawn to me through a reciprocation of prettiness. Had that been on, other men would have put her in their pockets with their meaty hands: after all, just ahead is the man who is better than you in every respect.

But because I had a carnal wish for learning, Jane came my way.

We dated regularly. We went to art movies. Now in those days sex had not been invented, so to speak. One took oneself to the extremes of passion in parked cars or bedrooms when parents were out for the night: but the essential was not consummated. Of course girls still say, 'No, no,' when they mean 'Yes, yes,' but back then the rebuttal was somewhat more in force. At the end of a fruitful and natural consummation could come a burgeoning foetus. And after that marriage, abortion, God knew what. Alien territory. So one did not transgress easily, and there was an understanding implicit in the gropings that in the end one would drive home in sexual agony.

I had worked part-time to buy an electric guitar, and I was a member of a band that played on Friday or Saturday nights at various student parties. We barely got by, musically and financially. There were four of us: lead guitar (myself), electric bass, drums, and a perpetually stoned cat who played all kinds of instruments very well – piano, saxophone, flute.

We played to order, like robots. There was no improvisation, no complexity, no jazz unless a few rehearsed riffs in the midst of a twelve-bar-blues number can be accounted as such.

I had no ambitions musically. I played to earn money to keep up payments on my crotchety old car, so essential to getting around, and for spare change to buy Jane hamburgers after we had seen Bergman's latest contribution to cosmic pessimism. Jane generally accompanied me to the various dances at which I played, but was mostly bored. 'Why don't you ever play *real* music?' she would ask. She meant jazz. 'It's not that kind of band,' I would reply, on the defence. 'I can play jazz if I want to.'

She came from a very rich background; her parents had a castle in Houghton, with uniformed servants, a bar, everything. She did not merely have her own room; it had an adjacent study. Her father was the head of an important liberal organisation, and needed a study to concoct his ringing denunciations of apartheid; so, in a kind of dreamy intellectual deliverance, he had provided his sons and daughter with studies. They would need them. Everybody needed them, right?

'Prove to me you can play jazz,' Jane said once. 'Bring your guitar to my house and see if you can play along with Parker or Mingus.' She had all the records. 'See if you can play like Coltrane, or only imitate Cliff Richard and The Shadows!'

Damn right I was going to try. So I practised at home, sending my fretful fingers over the frets, learning apparently spontaneous sequences of notes. I went over them, and over them again. Mother threw fits. 'Switch that thing off or I'll break it over your head! You'll have me in the bladdy lunatic asylum if you go on.'

'I make money out of it,' I would reply. 'I pay for my textbooks by playing the guitar.'

'No you don't. Your father pays for your textbooks by repping in the northern Transvaal, leaving me alone here to listen to your crap. You just play to show off to your rich little girlfriend.'

So it went on.

I went to Jane's house and played along with Parker and Mingus, their rich organic sounds coming out of vast hi-fi speakers that cost more than I could make out of my playing in a year. I played along, not very well, but surprisingly well enough to please Jane. Jazz, she explained to me (after all this was the Sixties), was the authentic music of the 'Negro'. It was, therefore, a bold statement about life from men who lived on the raw edge of danger and prejudice.

By implication, even listening to jazz showed not merely one's solidarity with an oppressed people, but was in itself a quasi-revolutionary act. Your heart was in the right area.

However. Jazz – as codified in those giant piles of records she had in racks and on shelves – was an imported subversion; the players were Americans. I put a hard point to Jane: wasn't all this a posture? In what way did it relate to the life content of South African blacks, 'our' blacks?

'It's the same thing. They use music in the same way. Look at Dollar Brand and Adam Moletsi.'

Adam Moletsi was invited from time to time to play on campus. The attentive white liberals would listen to him producing tortured notes from his saxophone, veritable cries of anguish and pride on which they would comment favourably.

After I had played along with Jane's records, we lay together on the bed and kissed. I took matters further.

'No, no.'

'Yes, yes.'

'No, stop.'

'I'd do anything for you. I want to make love with you.'

'You'd never respect me afterwards.'

'Of course I'd respect you afterwards. I'd respect you even more.'

'No.'

I sat upright, hurt and almost angry. 'You talk so much about freedom and all: why can't you be free with me?'

She shook her head. 'I'm not that kind of girl.'

'Well perhaps you should become that kind of girl. You're nothing but a –' And there I stopped short of using a term very familiar in my background, but alien to hers.

'A what?' she snorted, also sitting up. 'Just what am I? Go ahead and say what you were going to say.'

'A hypocrite,' I mumbled, for that was the most acceptable alternative that occurred to me right then.

She laughed. 'So I'm supposed to go to bed with you because I believe in freedom for the African people? That's the most nonsensical argument I've ever heard.'

'Well,' I said, producing like a magic rabbit an idea, a threat, a strategy. 'Would you go to bed with me if I stood up on stage with Adam Moletsi and played jazz just as well as he can?'

The proposition had coalesced out of the variant threads of our conversation, our relation of bodies, our sense of each other's

dimensions of soul.

And: 'Yes,' she said.

It happened that Adam Moletsi was coming to the campus within the next week. He would bring his usual backing band with him and would give a mid-afternoon concert in a medium-sized hall. Several hundred students could be expected to attend, the university Jazz Society (to which Jane and I belonged) would charge admission to non-members, and Adam and his band would be given the money that was taken in. It was an easy arrangement.

I went to the president of the Jazz Society and told him I wanted to play with Adam.

'No, you can't do that,' he said firmly. 'People will be paying to hear Adam, not you. Besides, it would look ridiculous if you, a white, went up and tried to compete with an assured black jazzman.' The president spoke snottily; I had offended some sense of racial propriety.

'Well,' I said, 'I'm going to ask Adam if I can play with him. It's his scene; he can decide.'

'I still say no,' said the president; but he was unsure now. 'Perhaps if Adam says yes it'll be OK. But I don't want trouble.' 'Piss off.'

'Piss off yourself you arrogant twerp.'

Let me speak about myself briefly, as I then was. I was just a young white lad from a succession of poor suburbs. Blacks were not, so to speak, visible to me. I had been brought up in the proprieties and rectitudes of a normal family for that time and place – except that an entire section, a nation one might say, had been rendered invisible to me. My parents spoke easily of 'boys', and I seldom met black people who were not servants – not of that amorphous gestation of 'garden boys' and 'kitchen girls' who scurried around and beneath the skirts of white society, cleaning up and being humble. My view of the real world was therefore unbalanced.

Jazz players, for people like Jane, myself, and indeed the president of the Jazz Society, represented far more than a musical ambience: they stood for their people, a symbol in the liberal's mind. Yet, after all, they were simply men; they struggled under an additional yoke when the liberals made their play of them, as if they were cards in a bridge game.

No wonder Adam Moletsi drank. He had to stand up there in the face of those white youths and play nigger for them.

I made my preparations for the afternoon of the concert. Because I, a white, was going to stand up with those said representatives of blackdom, I would take upon myself a quantum of blackness. I knew that (and knew it was why Jane would go to bed with me because of it: she really wanted to sleep with a black man). However, because I realised my physical limits when it came to playing the guitar, and knew I would be up front with professionals, I prepared myself psychologically for the encounter: I boosted my pride, lest there be cataclysm.

The hall filled. Adam and his band arrived. He was drunk. He waved to the girls and waggled his hips. There was some laughter in the hall.

Adam. A tall, cadaverous man, his liver mostly gone but giving to his light skin a yellow tinge. His blackness was inside him, not folded over his bones.

I went up. 'I want to play with you.' I pointed to a corner where I had in advance stacked my guitar and amplifier: a mean red Fender and a fine wood and metal amplifier with a great attached speaker.

Adam laughed, swaying over me. 'Hey man, you want to play with us?' He had an adopted American accent, like many black men of his generation. He was perhaps forty-five. An old soul.

The whole band laughed. The president of the Jazz Society, blushing like a rose, came up and whispered to Adam. I saw Jane shifting in the audience. Then Adam turned to me and said, 'Sure, you can join in on some numbers. Get set up.'

The band went straight into 'Bloomdido', the Bird and Diz number that is scatty and great. Adam played a solo and then turned to me to bring me in. I felt total exposure. 'Bloomdido' was far out of my range. Absurdly, I shook my head and Adam let the drummer go for thirty-two bars, an impressive explosion that diverted attention away from my initial, devastating failure. I sensed Adam's concern not to embarrass me and was swayed by curious emotions.

The next number was a straightforward twelve-bar-blues: three chords, up and down. A child could do well. Adam, I was certain, had set this up for me and I played a perfect solo when my turn came, being really fancy and overriding notes so that it sounded like Chet Atkins had come in, but funky, good. You could feel it was good. I was applauded.

So it went. Adam now knew what I could do, so he did not ask me in on numbers beyond my scope. At one point he took a nip of

brandy out of his coat pocket, sipped, and offered it to me. I took it, proud in front of all those envious white dudes.

The concert came to an end and the students filed out. I was left standing with Adam and the band, the president, and Jane, who came up and took my arm like Miss Universe. That was the proudest moment of my youth. I felt on fire. Perhaps the brandy helped, but I was at ease with Adam, and the thought of sex with Jane – assured now, on the line – churned in my bowels of compassion, as Lawrence would probably not have put it.

'You were very good,' said Jane. She smiled.

The president of the Jazz Society paid the band out and the men split, except Adam who sat back in one of the chairs, just like a student, and thoughtfully drank his brandy. His saxophone was in a case on the bench before him.

Finally there was just Adam, myself and Jane. We talked desultorily, unsure of each other. Then Adam said: 'Hey, man: you got a car?'

'Sure.'

'Let's go for a ride. Us three.'

This was Life. I was tense and excited. So was Jane. 'Us three.'

So we went driving, packed into my Ford with conversation and brandy. Adam told us a lot about himself, how he lived close to the edge but had good high-class gangster friends who helped him out. He actually sat there, reclining in the back seat and told us stuff like that, nodding off from time to time. He directed me, and soon I found that we were on our way to Alexandra township. A black area: I felt trepidation.

But we were not soon into the township when Adam sat up alertly and told me to park.

'You stay here,' he instructed Jane. Then he took my arm and we walked out together in those bitter streets, frozen in the early winter, to a shop where a Chinese man sat and watched.

We bought from him *dagga*, the weed, *boom*: that which I had always associated with precipitation into blackness, the revenge of the black man on the white whose consciousness cannot bear alteration.

A secret about drugs: any hell they give is better than the hell of the white man for the black.

We drove out of Alex, through mute, manicured, varnished suburbs, all order and the law incarnate, drove 'us three' with our cargo of hallucination and communication. We smoked the stuff and laughed like crazy as the world twisted and warped, and we

twisted and warped and flickered into bizarre, meaningless awareness: that point where just one more toke will be too much, or will reveal all. The Allness waiting there in the next joint, like reality about to serve a summons.

We drove to the top of the Melville Koppies, looking down on the suburbs and the city itself: far from any cop, smoking, smoking, pushing out smoke from our lungs as if we were on fire.

And what did we talk about? God knows.

But I came to clarity when Adam said: 'Listen man, give up playing. You're no good. This afternoon, that was just playing games.'

'But I was . . . fluent . . . I was OK, wasn't I?'

Jane looked intently at us two.

'You were OK: but you don't understand it. You don't understand jazz. You don't understand the pain, the suffering, the longing, the rocking, the rolling' Adam was almost gibbering.

He was very stoned. But, of course, I understood him all too well.

'I tried,' I said defensively.

'Sure. But that's not good enough. You'll never get there man: just face it, and you'll be happier.'

'What was wrong with my playing?'

'It was the wrong colour man, that was all.'

'I don't'

'It was the wrong colour! It's not your music and you can't play it and you never will play it. Even if you put out sounds like Charlie Parker, and there is no difference between you and Charlie Parker, there will still be a difference. It's not your music.'

Then he turned to Jane: 'But you're my woman, you're my music.'

'No she's not,' I shouted. 'Take your hands off her.'

We all pummelled each other; it was a farce. At last Adam gave up and simply laughed. 'OK white boy, she's your woman. Just take me to the station and drop me off. She's all yours.' Then, abruptly, he leaned over to me and kissed me; I could actually feel the essence of love there, a tolerance and an anguish; I smelt him.

I kissed him back.

I gave up my guitar. Jane gave me up. Adam died of cirrhosis of the liver. Jane married and had a child which drowned in her swimming pool, so she committed suicide.

The difference between youth and all that comes afterwards is a simple one, a stage or an event that puts matters into perspective. Real people really die. Real people have real limits.

Jazz is something I have on my record player.



Tate Mmuso Koele

Jobman

Achmat Dangor

Karel de Ras dropped the hammer and kicked the split-pole he had knocked into the hard ground to test its sturdiness. He mopped his forehead with a greasy cloth, cursing the heat with guttural mutterings.

'*Toe Pyp*, are you ready with that wire? Pyp? Where the *duiwel* are you?'

His handyman, Pyp Green, stood staring intently into the distance, oblivious of the beads of stinging sweat that rolled into his eyes. The strands of uncoiled fencing-wire lay limply at his feet.

'Hey, are you bleddy dreaming? What's wrong with you?'

Pyp pointed mutely into the distance, where someone was running across the veld, gesticulating frantically.

'Who's that?' De Ras asked, shading his eyes and looking to where Pyp's finger indicated.

'My son,' Pyp answered, trepidation in his voice.

'*Got!* What's wrong now? You people have always got some sort of trouble.'

A boy of about seven came running up to the two immobile figures, and collapsed, out of breath, at Pyp's feet.

'What is it, what is it?' Pyp asked.

'The bleddy *dommie*, Pa,' the boy gasped, 'Anna....'

'*Toe nou, toe nou klonkie*, first get your breath back.'

The boy, in automatic acquiescence to seniority, now addressed De Ras in a voice of lilting supplication.

'*Baas*, it's the *dommie*, Jobman. He took Anna. Just came and took her.'

'Anna's your daughter, *nê?*' De Ras asked Pyp.

Pyp nodded, his eyes mutely imploring.

'Ja alright. Go and see what's going on.'

Pyp uttered a hasty thanks and ran off, his son at his heels. De Ras beat the dust off his broad-brimmed hat, muttering.

'Trouble, always trouble, bleddy people.'

The rest of the workmen had gathered into an immobile group. They stared silently at the two rapidly receding figures. One of them stepped forward, half mindful of his master.

De Ras flung his hat into the dust in exasperation.

'Where the *bliksem* do you think you're going? Who told you lot to stop working? *Kom jong!* Get back to work.'

He picked his hat up and repeated the dusting process.

'What can you do anyway? The lot of you. Even Pyp. That *dommie* thing is cleverer than the whole lot. The sly bastard.'

De Ras was muttering to himself, not condescending to speak to his workers, who had by now resumed their digging and carting away of rocks.

'I had better go and see what's going on.' He donned his hat. 'And don't let me come back and find you lazy *boggers* loafing!' He got into his small bakkie and disappeared up the sand road in a cloud of dust.

The turmoil in Pyp's mind subsided as he ran, and gradually his thoughts attuned to the soft rustling of his bare feet on the scrubby ground.

The wind was gathering in the hills and behind it, Pyp knew, were the rain-clouds. It had been raining a lot in the Karoo, far more in the last two months than in ten years. The scrub was soft beneath his feet; enough grazing for the sheep. We will not become prosperous, but at least we will not be hungry when the winter comes. Fewer young men would leave for the cities, some would even return.

And Jobman had returned.

When Pyp entered the settlement, he stopped to rest before going to his house. There was a sharp burning pain in his side. Getting old, he thought.

He could hear the cars on the national road which the settlement of concrete houses and corrugated-iron roofs bordered, going to Beaufort West, and beyond to Cape Town.

One of those cars had dropped Jobman, in his ancient corduroy jacket, at the roadside.

'The dog!' Pyp muttered to himself and started running again, although his house was now only a short distance away. When he entered the house his wife looked at him searchingly but paused only briefly in her work.

'Mary, Jobman took Anna?'

'Yes.'

'And the child?'

'Yes.'

'The bleddy dog!'

'It is his child.'

'But he can't just come into my house and take Anna.'

'She went with him.'

'Didn't he force her?'
'She didn't argue.'
'That bleddy *dom* dog.'
'She had his child.'
'I'm going to get her back.'

His wife did not answer. She tied the scarf around her head, signifying that she was going out.

'I have to go and finish the ironing.'

These extra jobs and their rewards were the fringe benefits which the De Ras family traditionally bestowed upon the foreman's wife.

Pyp sat down irresolutely, mopping his brow continuously.

'Daniel, you want to bring her back so that every young thing, and some old ones too, can chase after her. Soon she'll have another child, and another. How many more mouths must we feed? That is Jobman's child. Let him feed the child.'

'That dumb idiot! How will he feed her? Or the child? And he's mad. God knows what he'll do to them.'

'He won't let you bring her back.'

The door closed behind Mary. Pyp's resolution crumbled completely. He hated Jobman with a helpless passion. He hated the trouble Jobman was bringing to his family, to the whole settlement; the disruption he caused in their ordered lives.

If only he was younger! He would teach that dumb dog a lesson! Yet he knew that even if he had been younger, Jobman would have had his way. Jobman was cunning and dangerous and no one ever knew what he thought because Jobman could not speak.

Pyp lifted the lid of the water-bucket and drank two mug-fuls of the cool, dank water.

He must find a way to beat Jobman and get Anna back, or else he would lose the respect of the men. It was not good for a foreman to lose the respect of men who worked under him.

'Beaten by a dangerous *dommie!*' they would say.

A dangerous, cunning *dommie*. None of the others had the courage to face Jobman. Still, he would lose their respect. And yet there was truth in what his wife said. A young woman, unmarried and with a child, attracted the attention of young men. But their attentions were not very often honest. His daughter was 19, her son was two years old. They would not want to marry her, only use her. All of them, except Jannie.

Jannie. Jannie would help him. Together they might put Jobman in his place. But Jannie was also afraid of Jobman. He only began

visiting Anna when Jobman had left for Kimberley. No, he would have to find a way by himself.

Pyp's disordered thoughts were disturbed by the sound of bare feet on the doorstep. Pyp rose and quietly picked up the iron poker from the stove.

'Pa? Pa?' His son Paul peered enquiringly into the gloom. A look of fear briefly crossed his face when he saw his father brandishing the poker.

'Are you going to fetch Anna?'

'Yes, in a little while.'

'Pa, Baas Karel picked me up. He says he'll take you.'

Pyp felt both relieved and anxious. Jobman would not resist if Baas Karel was with him. But afterwards? He knew De Ras did not like involving himself in these matters. He would not always protect Pyp and his family. Yet he could not tell the boss that he had stopped work, and had brought De Ras up here in the process, only to leave the whole matter there. An impatient hoot made Pyp's decision for him.

'Well, do you want to go and get your daughter back?'

'Yes, thank you, *Meester*. Sorry for the trouble. You know what a trouble-maker that *dommie* is.' Again that lilting subservience.

'Ja. Ja. Get on at the back.'

As Pyp clambered onto the back of the bakkie, he saw a silent curse forming on De Ras's lips. Pyp blanched and clung onto the van as it moved off across the bumpy road.

Jobman busied himself with the kindling of a fire in the old combustion stove while, under the silent command of his eyes, Anna swept the dusty floor. The child, named Daniel after his grandfather, squatted in the corner, watching Jobman's lithe movements in bewilderment.

Their 'home' was a crumbling corrugated-iron structure that had been used as a mission school in the days of Johan de Ras. Jobman's father, Piet Jobman, had been the schoolmaster and priest. 'Converted' to Christianity and the Dutch Reformed Church by Johan de Ras, the late Jobman in his youth had shown such zealous dedication to his religion, that Johan had allowed him to assume the role reserved by tradition for the benevolent 'white father'.

Piet Jobman, under the patronage of Johan de Ras, led a life of blissful fanaticism, combining his frenetic religious activities with the role of foreman on the De Ras estates. The bane of widower

Jobman's life was his son's dumbness. Young Jobman, in addition to his critical physical defect, also displayed a demonic stubbornness. Wild and undisciplined, he roamed the vast emptiness of the Karoo. He neither schooled nor prayed, and despite many savage beatings, he resisted both Jobman's and De Ras's desperate efforts to teach him to read.

He was still enclosed by the wall of impenetrable silence that had brought his father to his knees, begging the Lord to relieve life, Jobman and his son of the collective burden.

'He is better off dead, *Meester,*' Piet Jobman would often say to Johan de Ras. The latter's death preceded Piet Jobman's by three years, during which time young Karel de Ras brimming with new ideas gleaned at University, relieved Piet of his friendship and his captive religious following. Karel arranged for the young 'coloureds' to attend a government school in Demas. And a properly ordained Minister was given a district parish in a brick church on the estate.

Piet Jobman was allowed to pine away in his empty church and school. His well-fed stomach could not comprehend the minds of these new young white Gods, who gave Jobman's people greater opportunities, more freedom, and destroyed in the process their fundamental right to simplicity and the fostering of their own pioneer spirit.

Piet Jobman died, unlamented by the labourers who now lived in concrete huts and whose children went to school and spoke Afrikaans without the lilting pureness of their forefathers. Young Jobman displayed no grief at his father's graveside, inscrutably accepting the condolences of the community.

Before the customary and numerous graveside eulogies began, young Jobman walked away from the grave and returned to his home, the mission school. The school was built on rocky grounds, unsuitable for either grazing or cultivation. But Jobman did not consciously think of the economics, nor of why the derelict structures were allowed to stand.

The land and home was his; he had lived there for as long as he could remember. The matter of legal possession was irrelevant. Jobman was part of the land, shaped and moulded by its silences and its harshness. It was also part of him, hence it was his.

His sharp ears picked up the sound of a dull drone. Outside the wind had picked up, blowing freshly across the flatness of the Karoo and settling dust in the hills. It will not rain, the wind told him, not until tomorrow, when the wind subsides.

He raised his hand and stilled the swish of Anna's broom.

De Ras's van came bumping up the steep road, reduced by overgrowth to a mere path. His agitation was growing.

Although he was vaguely aware that, faced by the intransigence of this harsh land and its people, his innovations had not performed the miracles his youthful innocence had hoped they would, he still regarded the methods and the principles employed by his father as archaic and self-defeating. He cursed the fact that seven years ago he allowed this vestige of his father's paternalistic and misguided benevolence to survive.

He should have demolished the mission school. He should not have allowed this sense of ownership to grow in Piet Jobman's son. There would have been none of this trouble. But there they stood, both the school and Jobman, waiting for them.

De Ras brought the van, in a cloud of dust, to a violent halt a few yards away from where Jobman now squatted, his arms locked around his knees.

'Jobman — you have Anna here.' De Ras fought back the anger surging up in him. He knew Jobman could not answer him.

'Shit! Pyp, you'd better speak to this dumb *hond*. I'll blerry kill him.'

'Job, is Anna here? My daughter? You know my blerry daughter.' Pyp, unconsciously emulating De Ras's tone, instilled a note of anger into his voice.

Still Jobman squatted, his arms folded.

'Anna! Are you in there?' De Ras shouted. 'Wait Pyp, let me go and see.'

Jobman rose as De Ras moved forward. For a second they stared at each other, the huge farmer towering over the shorter, small-built Jobman.

Anna shuffled out of the hut, holding the child by the hand.

'Yes, *Baas* Karel.'

De Ras stepped past Jobman, but made no move either to enter the hut or go nearer to Anna.

'Come Anna, we're going home,' Pyp said.

Anna cast her eyes down without answering.

'*Got, meidjie*, you heard your father speak,' De Ras growled.

'I'm not going back, *Baas*,' Anna answered hesitantly.

De Ras threw his hands up in the air. '*Got!*'

'Anna, look, I said you must come home.'

Anna, leaving the child's hand, twisting her scarf into a knot, looked bewildered from De Ras to Jobman. Jobman stiffened, almost perceptibly, and Anna drew back. Taking the child by the

hand she went back inside the hut. The three men stood silently for a moment, De Ras glowering with rage while Jobman stood quietly, immobile. Pyp vacillated between the two in a state of utter confusion.

'Pyp, if she wants to stay with him you can't force her to go back,' De Ras said curtly.

'Yes,' Pyp said weakly.

'I want you off my blerry farm by tomorrow morning. Understand? You dumb *hond!* Come Pyp.'

Pyp clambered onto the back of the van and collapsed into a silent, heaving heap. De Ras stood by the open door of his vehicle, glaring at Jobman.

'At sun-up my workers are going to break this blerry *pandok* down. Make sure you're not inside when we get here. God help you, *hotnot*, if you are.'

The wind's hissing over the scrubby grasslands subsided, and at dusk the rain came; the type of '*mot-reën*' that lasted for days.

Jobman stared out through the rain-streaked window; never had he seen the Karoo so green and lush. Not the rolling opulence of the Transvaal nor the staggering beauty of the winelands beyond the black mountains. Here the greenness, though young and hardy, could crumble back into parched dust without warning.

'Jobman, where will we take the child in the rain?'

Jobman turned slowly, and motioned to Anna to rekindle the fire. In the far corner of the hut he lifted a floor-board and commenced unpacking a number of bundles wrapped in plastic. He brought out a sheepskin, an ancient overcoat, grey faded blankets and knee-high boots. This hoard was an inheritance that had constituted his father's worldly possessions: cast-offs from the De Ras family. Lying flat on his stomach, his hands groping in the darkness of the hole, he finally produced a curious metal contraption, carefully wrapped in oil-cloth.

Communication between Anna and Jobman was confined to simple gestures on Jobman's part. Anna understood, and unquestioningly obeyed each of Jobman's signals. She gathered the sheepskin and blankets, and proceeded to prepare a bed for the child, while Jobman unpacked his contraption, handling it as gently as if it were a child.

Anna watched with consternation as he slowly and carefully assembled a crude but deadly home-made rifle. The barrel had once belonged to an air-gun, the butt he had fashioned from the

seat of an oak chair. Using his pocket knife he screwed the parts together. The chamber, which could only load one bullet at a time, was from an old muzzle-loader he had modified by laborious filing.

For an hour he examined each part carefully, oiling the metallic parts and polishing the butt. From the farthest recess of his treasure-hole he produced a metal cigar-box which contained a dozen shells.

Jobman was sitting close to the crackling fire, sweating profusely. As he lifted his face momentarily to wipe his brow, Anna saw a strange glint in his eyes.

'Jobman, are we going to leave?'

Jobman nodded his assent.

'Then why are you fiddling with that gun?'

Using his fingers, Jobman demonstrated flight, and pursuit. Slowly, agonisingly, their mute conversation grew. Both of them using sign-language now, for Anna found her voice strange and eerie before the gesticulating man.

'Why will they follow us? You are leaving the *Meester's* farm. And my mother will stop my father from coming after us.'

'They don't only want me off this place, or you back home. They want me dead.'

'Why?'

'Because I defied them. I am dumb and I can't read or write, but I don't need them. They hate people who do not need them.'

'Why did you come back? For me?'

A thread snapped. Jobman folded his arms and with his eyes told Anna to go and sleep.

Why had he come back? For his frivolous young girl? For his son?

He watched the face of the sleeping child, and that of Anna, beneath the cloistered burden of sheepskin and rough blankets. He, too, fleetingly experienced the illusory sense of refuge that the humble dwellings of our kind are endowed with. The smell of perspiration, of cold and left-over cooking-fat, familiar odours clinging torpidly to one's hands and clothes. The cloying warmth of the safety that transcends the ravages of our lives, that becalms old men into dreamless slumber, tired, tired of growing old.

Outside the wind was unpacking in the vast empty veld, the daily carnage of my kind.

Long after Jobman had fallen, exhausted, into a deep sleep, a figure walked hastily between the darkened windows of the 'settlement' huts. Pyp pulled his overcoat tighter to ward off the icy wind, and the cold words of his wife that rankled in his mind.

He had accused her of encouraging Anna to go into a life of destitution with that 'dumb *hond*'.

'We are all poor people. There's nothing he can't give her that we haven't given her, or that she couldn't give herself. At least he wants her enough to defy even a white man. Why didn't you take her from him? Are you not strong enough?'

Already the recriminations were starting. The mockery in downcast, seemingly sympathetic eyes.

Pyp reached the corrugated-iron huts where the single men were quartered. He entered without knocking and amidst the maze of sleeping bodies he sought out Jan's bed. The young man was not asleep. He sat by the stove with two of his companions. Their conversation ceased abruptly when Pyp approached.

'Jan, I want to talk to you.'

'Ja,' Jan said without moving.

Pyp cleared his throat in embarrassment, and Jan's companions rose. But they were waved back into their seats by Jan.

'Oom Pyp, you can speak in front of my friends.'

'Well, Jan you know what it's about.'

'Ja.'

'I want to go and get Anna back. She's my daughter.'

'Ja, Oom Pyp.'

'Well....'

'You don't have to ask for help, Oom Pyp. We three are going when everybody's asleep.'

'We'll show that *dommie* something!' said one of Jan's companions.

'Ja. I'm not afraid of him,' said Jan.

'Come, have something to warm you, Oom Pyp.' Pyp accepted the anaemic but potent wine and drank deeply.

Jobman woke, body numb with cold. The fire had gone out, and the room was in absolute darkness. Again, he heard the muffled scream. His hands searched beside him in the darkness, and were reassured by the coldness of gunmetal.

Anna! Anna and the child were gone. The wind swung the door on its creaking hinges.

Fool! Fool! To have fallen asleep!

The first blow from Jan's stick struck him between the shoulder-blades and sent him sprawling across the floor. The second blow was on the barrel of the rifle, for Jobman had twisted around to face his opponent. Jobman fired at the perceptible shadow

hovering over him. By the time Jan's screams subsided, Jobman was leaning against the wall and had reloaded the rifle. Jan's companion was shot as he raised his crawling body in the doorway, making ready to run. Jobman, who had fallen asleep fully clad, now ran down the pathway leading to the settlement.

Jan's second companion had turned back to see why his two friends were delayed. He was still staring in stupefaction at the wild figure flying down the hillside when he was killed.

Pyp struggled vainly to hurry along the reluctant Anna. He heard the third shot long before they reached the fence at the commencement of the estate's cultivated land.

He handed the child to Anna and told her to run. 'He will kill all of us!'

Anna took the child who had by now begun to wail and held him protectively to her breast. She refused to flee any further. After a moment of frantic pleading Pyp gave up and fled himself. A bullet struck him in the shoulder as he clambered over the fence he had helped to erect only that day. He lay amidst the heavy stalks of the sunflower plant, listening to Jobman's ungentle search, slashing at the tall plants with his rifle.

Silently Pyp cursed his folly in going after Jobman. He realised now why even De Ras treated the tongueless dog with such circumspection and caution. He wondered vaguely what the fate of his other companions in misadventure had been. A quick silent death in the darkness, or mere wounding, with the prospect of facing the wrath of their employer for having disobeyed his distinct orders:

'Pyp, you listen to me. Don't any of you *volkies* try and do anything by yourselves, understand? I'll handle this my way. I want no more trouble on my farm!'

Trouble! Shooting, killing, wounding. A man like him, people like his, rarely encountered this kind of trouble. It was almost dawn when Pyp considered it safe to move. Weak from loss of blood and almost frozen, he staggered off in the vague direction of home and safety. An hour later he was found in the fields by one of the household servants, a hundred yards away from the De Ras estate house.

Karel nodded assent as the constable revealed the faces of each of the victims and showed him the name tags tied to their arms. Their faces had the expression of a vast grotesque peace. Pale-grey death-masks that only hours before had laughed and cursed,

and with lowered eyes avoided his admonishments.

Karel felt a great need to summon up sympathy for the deceased men, whose lot it should have been to die deaths as insignificant as their lives had been. He felt only revulsion.

'Ja, Karel, you really gathered trouble for yourself these ten years.' In ten years he had inherited a huge farm, a widowed mother, a wife and sons, and three corpses. Or had he inherited? His family had owned the land for a hundred years — his father's father, then his father, and his progeny would own it one day.

Yet they owned it like transient overlords, generation after generation passing on its ownership, while these people never seemed to pass on. How their faces would wrinkle into furrows of sorrow as they dug their hands into the dry soil when the drought was severe and prolonged.

When the first rains came that year, they danced, his *volkies*, with outstretched arms, invoking their thanks to God.

'*Dankie, Heer, dankie Heer.*'

With a fierce joy, their muscles rippling beneath their blackened, sweating skin, they dug into the soft earth, as if it were the womb of a woman.

His earth! His soil! The scum! How easily they assumed ownership. An unspoken and undefined possession rendered him numb and helpless. He had often watched them, in the midst of the sunflower plants, swaying as the tall plants swayed in the wind, gnarling, growing old and rotting with the earth. They would be here long after he had passed on.

'Well, we had better get this *stom hotnot* of yours. A blerry rifle! Well, we'll get him in. I'm sending Venter and two coloured constables after him.'

Jobman. Tongueless, as simple and hard as stone. He asserted himself, strived, even killed for the possession of what was his. He too, like me, thought De Ras, will lose it all. They will possess all, through reticence and by default.

'Ja. I'm going home, *Sersant*, I've got a farm to run.'

'Right. We'll let you know when they get back. And Karel, listen, check those *volkies* of yours, man. If there's one of them who even smells of trouble, get rid of him, man. *Got*, you'll never rest, man.'

The streets of the town of Demas were white and still in the mornings, like the streets of Karel's childhood. He had grown up there, living with his grandfather, while his father and the rest of his family lived on the estate, among the sheep, in the packets of silence, becoming as unpredictable as the Karoo itself.

His father could not find expression for his missionary zeal in the midst of this town of upright burgers. Solitary Sunday spires, black suits burning in the turgid sun, clothed in immaculate Afrikaans.

His father preferred those eager brown faces, the wine-reddened eyes, the spectacle of 300 years of lineal shame, which many of his enemies had inferred was part of his own heritage.

The madman! Look at what his 'responsibility' has endowed me with. Three dead *hotnots*, and another one, dangerous as a mad dog, somewhere on my farm with a rifle in his hands.

They will come, driving slowly across the dirt track that bisects the farm. They will come: one white policeman and perhaps two or three 'coloured' constables. The white man will drive, while one of the 'coloureds' will sit next to him, solemnly conscious of the privilege. The others will be standing on the back of the empty truck, and with their hands shading their eyes, they will scan the vast and empty flatness of the land.

At most, the policeman expected the hunt to last no more than a few hours. Despite the heavy rains, the Karoo still remained sparsely vegetated, for even in nature barren habits are not easily overcome. There was very little that could provide refuge for a fugitive, especially when he was burdened with a young child and a woman.

Unless he left the open veld and went into the hills.

Jobman had left the track approximately two hours after dawn. By noon he had reached the rim of low hills that demarcated the end of the De Ras estate. Fifteen miles beyond lay the little town of Karakul. His uncle lived there. He would leave Anna and the child with him.

This old man, like Jobman's father, was not overly generous, but he would not refuse Anna and the child. Like most 'coloured' *predikers*, they heeded the ill-defined dictums of their religion. Compassion and pity was not an act of mere human kindness; it was an enactment of their simple faith.

'Die woord van God.'

Jobman observed the cloud of dust that heralded his pursuers, making its agonising progress across the veld. The sun would be low by the time they realised he was in the hills. He had killed three 'coloured' men. There would thus be no full-scale search. They were people, nevertheless, and the law dictated pursuit and apprehension. But the manner of the pursuit and its urgency was left to the discretion of the uniformed man driving the van. Jobman

had not, after all, shot three white men.

The van should swing towards Jobman's present location in about three hours, and two hours thereafter they would have to abandon the van and continue the pursuit on foot. By then it would be dark.

The boegoe-brandy burned fiercely into the laceration Jan's weapon had left on his back. The wound had been aggravated by chafing against the child's knees. He had carried the child strapped to his back while Anna was burdened with blankets and other paraphernalia necessary for survival.

Anna, seated in the shade of an overhanging rock, sang to the child, cheerful little psalms quaintly transformed by the tongue that found it difficult to grapple with the turgidity of Biblical language. There was a plaintive strain in her voice, an unconscious invocation of God's help in their plight.

His mother too had sung like that to her child whenever there was stress in the house. His mother's beauty was one of sculptured emaciation.

'*Tering*,' the doctor had informed her husband and his master. Weak and emaciated by tuberculosis, she was spared the agony of wasting away by dying in childbirth. Jobman had not been allowed to see his brother who came, already dead, out of the womb of his mother. She too wore a mask of ready-made death. They were left to console each other, the father infected by the madness of zealotry, and the dumb son whose sickness drove the older man to fits of incensed violence.

Jobman, with a gesture of irritation, stopped Anna's singing. He felt no tenderness for either her or the child. As she strapped the child to his back, he recognised her knowledge of this in her sorrowful face.

It was dark by the time the three panting policemen reached the rocky hillside where the fugitives had been four hours ago. Constable Venter was on the point of turning back when one of the 'coloured' constables showed him the glimmer of a camp-fire further up on the hillside.

Despite exaggerated caution, their heavy boots stumbled over the loose stones, warning of their presence long before they reached what they thought was Jobman's camp-fire. Constable Venter, his pistol drawn, entered the circle of flickering light realising, too late, that they had been led into a trap.

His warning shout was pre-empted by a shot from Jobman's

rifle, and one of the 'coloured' constables crumbled to the ground, his knee shattered.

Venter and the other constable threw themselves to the ground and crawled into the safety of darkness. They scanned the shadows, their eyes searching for Jobman's hiding place.

'Swine!' Venter cursed.

But Jobman was gone already, racing down the other side of the hill to join Anna and the child where he had left them, three miles away.

Slowly the two policemen rose and dragged their injured colleague out of the firelight. As they carried his awkward bulk down the hillside, all thought of position, race or privilege was forgotten. They were conscious only of the darkness around them and of Jobman, who had suddenly acquired demonic proportions.

De Ras listened in silence to the sergeant's agitated recounting of the previous evening's encounter with Jobman.

Karel shrugged. 'I suppose you'll get him eventually.'

SERGEANT (*curtly*): Yes. We'll get him. But you don't seem very interested.

DE RAS: Look, I won't interfere with your job.

SERGEANT: *Got, man*, Karel! This man did all this killing on your property.

DE RAS: He did not harm my property or my family or me.

SERGEANT: So? Karel, I get the impression you don't want this blerry *hotnot* to be caught.

DE RAS: I did not say so. I don't want to interfere with your work, that's all.

SERGEANT: *Got*, Karel! I want your help, man. I don't want this thing to become any bigger — help from Victoria-Wes, more police, dogs, a helicopter, you know.

DE RAS: It will be a reflection on you?

SERGEANT: One blerry *hotnot*, dumb on top of it. And I must ask Victoria-Wes for help?

DE RAS: I've got a farm to see to.

SERGEANT: Karel, it won't take more than a day. If you help, we can split and search this whole area. Venter with two coloureds, me, you. We'll get this *bogger* before tomorrow night.

DE RAS: We won't.

SERGEANT (*vehemently*): Not you too, Karel? Even Venter thinks this damn *hotnot* is some kind of devil, a real fighter or something. He's just another one of them, another blerry gangster. Only he

knows the area and he's got a rifle. That's the difference.

Incidentally, are you missing any firearms?

DE RAS: No. I've checked already.

SERGEANT: Karel, Karel. You've changed. You're not the Karel de Ras who grew up with me.

DE RAS: I am Karel de Ras.

SERGEANT: Yes, yes, the name is the same. What did they do to you in that *Engelse* university? Your fire is out, man. You look like you want to give up.

DE RAS: Give what up?

SERGEANT: All this. Not only the land, I mean. But your rights. Your right to own this land, to be master.

DE RAS: I think you're going a bit too far.

SERGEANT: Sorry Karel. It's just that you don't seem to care anymore. That's the difference.

DE RAS: You don't have to threaten me. I'll help you. But I work on my own; no constables, coloured or otherwise.

SERGEANT: Alright, alright. It's Sunday today and we can't do anything. We start at sun-up tomorrow morning.

DE RAS: Fine.

SERGEANT: And Karel, this man is dangerous. Shoot on sight, alright?

DE RAS: Ja, ja.

De Ras wandered about the huge, rambling house in a state of moody agitation. He resisted his family's attempts to draw him into the camaraderie of the afternoon's family get-together. His aunts and uncles and their haughty young fair-haired sons and daughters had come to visit their 'rich relatives'.

He was ill at ease during the ritualistic Sunday lunch and his irritation doused the flames of that renowned rural conviviality. When the current subject of gossip about the now-notorious Jobman, that tongueless *hotnot*, came up he excused himself and retreated into the study.

'This business is giving Karel a lot of problems,' his wife said, belatedly excusing her husband's unsociable mood.

Soon, however, the company's spirit and composure was restored as each tried to outdo the other by relating, with ingenious imitations, tales from the lives of their '*volgies*'.

From the study Karel listened to the roars of backslapping laughter which gradually subsided, and eventually degenerated into a political argument among the males. The younger members of the clan proposed solutions of the 'coloured problem' in language

of such a radical colour that it drew heated and somewhat intemperate responses from their fathers.

'Let's ask Karel. After all, he went to an *Engelse* university,' he heard a voice say.

The door to his study burst open and Oom Hans, the eldest of his mother's brothers, entered. A florid man, whose humour and demeanour were as brash as his dress, he accosted Karel with a look of conspiratorial wickedness.

'Karel, *ou seun*, do you know what your cousins, all graduates from Stellenbosch, are saying? That these *hotnots* are Afrikaners!'

'So?'

'So? Afrikaners, man! Like you and me. Like your father and mine. Do you say they are Afrikaners?'

'No,' Karel said quietly.

His uncle left the study cock-a-hoop.

'Karel, the man from the *Engelse* university says "No!" And blerry hell, he's right. Afrikaner my foot!'

There followed a subdued response from the younger generations.

'You don't understand — you are too set in your ways — it does not mean they are our equals — we don't have to forfeit our heritage; they are Afrikaners, but brown ones.'

Karel's mother tactfully steered the gathering into the garden for tea, and the subject evaporated as the younger ones went off to explore the farm.

A silence ensued. The clock ticked and the wind rustled in the neat row of trees that Karel's father had so carefully nurtured as a wind-break to protect the farmhouse from the wind as it swept across the Karoo.

Karel left the house and took a round-about way to the settlement, ostensibly to arrange for some able-bodied men to accompany him in the morning.

He heard the party of young adventurers talking about the mist that hung over the hills. It would be cold tonight. The wind would drive the mist across the veld and leave it hanging there, torporously. Their voices faded into the quickening dusk, like extinguished lanterns.

Above the settlement hung a pall of smoke. The families were making fires, for they too recognised the signs of a bitterly cold night.

He had taught them to see these things, or had they taught him? He had often heard the phrase 'being close to the earth'. He had

heard it from those misty-eyed young people he had left behind.

It was miserable, close to the earth. Cold and forlorn, a state of nothingness, a life expiring within the confines of a smoke-filled hovel.

And who am I to disturb this filthy closeness?

'Naand, Baas.'

'Naand.'

'Pyp, Pyp, are you there?'

The door opened and Pyp emerged together with a gust of smoke.

'Pyp, leave the door open, so the smoke can go out,' a woman's voice called after him.

'How's your arm?'

'Alright, Baas. Alright.'

'Listen, I want four young fellows. We're going into the veld tomorrow. Tell them to be down there by five o'clock. But not you. You take the rest and repair the fence near the road.'

'Alright Baas. Naand.'

'Naand.'

Despite the rapidly falling darkness Karel took a detour home. He paused in the midst of the sunflower field, listening to the rustle of the wind and the myriad unidentifiable noises of the Karoo.

As a child he had believed the old Hottentot legend that the wind was but a messenger of the rivers, carrying tidings from the small and frail Gamtoos to the mighty Vaal. Perhaps it dropped part of its burden of lyrical tidings here, over the Karoo. Now this arid place sounded like a river in flood. Yet who listened or spoke to it? Only he, De Ras, and somewhere out there, Jobman the *dommie*. He laughed.

'Perhaps that's your punishment for being black. He didn't give you a tongue, so you can't speak to the wind.'

Jobman was listening to the wind, its icy shrillness imparting the imponderable messages that only he, and perhaps De Ras, understood. No one would venture into the veld tonight. Furthermore, it was Sunday, and the Sabbath weighed upon his pious pursuers like an old puritan God, the defiance of which was more sinful than allowing a killer to escape.

He was exhausted and cold, and he needed rest. By dawn he must be out of the hills, making his way directly across the farm. Ten miles northwards he would meet the national road to Kimberley.

He knew that the search would be intensified, but policemen work only on what they know, basing their action on the premise of probability. They would start their search at the point at which they last encountered him. By then he would be beyond the boundaries of the De Ras estate, across the wild, rocky uninhabited land to the north. Once he reached the gorge he would be safe.

He thought momentarily of Anna and the child whom he had left in the reluctant custody of his uncle. Their coming had not been enthusiastically greeted.

'He's bad news,' his uncle had said.

Because he could not make himself understood, he had communicated through a crestfallen Anna, who, dirty and weary from their strenuous journey, communicated Jobman's words in soft humble tones. This gave Jobman's uncle a feeling of authority which normally Jobman would not have permitted him. However, he prudently restrained himself.

'Ja, ja. I can see this is my brother's son. Gave poor old Piet more trouble than his life was worth. What's his problem now?'

'He asks if we can stay here.'

'In trouble again, heh? What has he done now? Stolen another sheep?'

'He says only the child. And me.'

'So he wants to burden us with troubles, heh?'

'He says he will pay you.'

'Him pay? What with? But money is not the question. If it's trouble, I want to know what it is. Don't want the police at my door.'

The child had started to wail, and his aunt intervened.

'Got! Is this child still alive? *O nee!* Look how blue he is from the cold. Give him here,' she barked, freeing him from Jobman's back.

'Ja, you and the child can stay. But not him.'

Jobman left behind the piteous contents of his purse, and with a nod bade them goodbye. He did not acknowledge the look of yearning in Anna's troubled eyes.

Now as he built up the fire, he cast them from his mind.

Both Jobman and De Ras left on their journeys an hour before dawn. Jobman ran with a slow easy gait across the veld while De Ras drove across the dirt track towards the ravine. He would be there an hour before Jobman.

There was not much wind this morning and the mist hung over the hills far later than it should. He had never seen the Karoo so

green before. De Ras did not think of beauty as being 'exquisite'. It was something hard and real, something to be used, to be ploughed or sheared; something useful, a tangible entity that one could hold and feel. He scanned the veld through the telescope of his rifle: the softly contoured hills were like the breasts of a woman. There, in the mists, the Hottentot gods had gambolled, feasting with the same intensities as their mortal offspring.

Now it belonged to his kind, the white man.

As Jobman came into view, De Ras adjusted his telescope, coldly observing his quarry. The lithe wiry body glistening with sweat despite the coldness of the morning. And there was a content, almost peaceful expression on Jobman's face.

With deliberate measure, De Ras squeezed the trigger. Long after the echo of the shot had died, he continued to stare at the fallen figure through the telescope, as if it was part of the landscape. Just another fallen 'hotnotgot' that would become part of the pitiable legends these people created to glorify a forgotten past.



Livingstone Gocina

The Promise

Gladys Thomas

I, Maria Klaasen, came from the Swartland to this city. I remember when it all happened so suddenly on that beautiful farm-fresh morning. I was busy making the morning mieliepap for the children who were hungry and restless. Beta was lucky to be at school still, and so was little Mannetjie, my baby brother, the apple of my father's eye. Mama worked over at the big house as a housemaid.

When I think back I remember her often saying, 'You're not going to be no maid, Maria. You've got your Standard Six and you are a smart girl. You're going back to school as soon as Mannetjie is bigger.'

To return to school became my only wish! I often prayed to God to help me. Papa worked in the fields, leaving at four o'clock every morning. On that particular morning I was woken by the clanging sound of the labourers' spades.

I remember that the atmosphere was tense between Mama and Papa. I overheard her say, 'Where do we go from here? You know you cannot do any other work except work in the fields. Even if you had grown up in the big house and your mother had been their maid like me, our days here are numbered. It cuts no ice! Why must your mouth always run away with you when you're drunk?'

'But it's the truth.'

'I know it is the truth. But these people don't like it!'

It all happened the previous Saturday when the 'Oubaas' took the farmworkers on their monthly outing to the dorp. The children would run around and the wine flowed freely. The teenagers preferred the cinema and had to hike back at night to the farm. Wives would sit and breast-feed their babies unashamedly while the men had a good time in the small country bar. The young girls would do the shopping and be on the lookout for rummage sales. I remember the town square being packed on these outings with babies' bare bums and mothers with their exposed breasts; the rummage sales, purchased meat and groceries, and drunk men urinating in the side streets. Who cares, they seemed to think we were away from the farm for a holiday.

That morning Papa got drunk and started swearing at the passing whites. Said they're all a lot of slave-drivers and told them

to look at our women in their rags and at the near-naked babies. Someone shouted that he needed a soapbox and the people laughed at the suggestion.

One of the neighbouring farmers quietly went over to the Hotel and called out the 'Oubaas' who came rushing out, red up to his ears. He took Papa by the scruff of his neck and threw him into the truck and shouted at him, 'Sit op jou gat totdat ons huistoe gaan, verdomde donner.' Papa struck his head against the side of the truck and I was so upset at the punishment meted out to him that I stood crying near the truck until we moved off.

When we arrived back at the farm the 'Oubaas' asked the others to hold Papa, but they pretended to be too drunk and attempted to stumble off to their shacks. He called them back and told them to see what would happen to people who liked to make political speeches. He called his son, who had returned recently from army training, to help hold Papa. My mother pleaded with the 'Oubaas' but he was determined to use his whip.

'Hy praat nie op so 'n manier van die dusvolk nie!'

'Asseblief, Oubaas,' my mother pleaded.

'Wat gaan aan in jou gedagtes? Ek neem vir julle dorp toe en hy wil politiek praat!'

The whip came cracking down over my father's back. After I don't know how many strokes, the children became hysterical. He stopped finally with the sweat streaming down his face, told us that it was his teatime and walked back to the big house. The other workers, by now sober, carried Papa inside and I washed his face.

Mama had to go back to the old house to serve tea to the 'Oubaas'. It was then that I made my decision to get the hell out of there and move to the city. I kept on patting the wet facecloth over the wrinkled face and tried to cheer him up.

'I'll read for you tonight, Papa.'

'I'll be alright, child,' he said softly.

My mother always brought reading matter from the big house: magazines, with beautiful fashions that I dreamt of wearing, and other books. At night I would lie between them and read in the candle-light: love stories, fiction, articles, anything that happened to take Papa's fancy. He and Mama liked to listen to the stories that I read them and he often remarked that he never dreamt that one of his children would one day be able to read and write. He looked real proud during our reading sessions.

'Go to sleep now, Papa, so that the swelling can go down.'

'What do you think of me, Maria?'

'I love you, Papa.' I closed the door and went to feed the chickens and look for Beta who had run away when she saw the whip.

The following morning the children ate their mieliepap and Beta left for school which was miles away from the farm. Mannetjie was having his afternoon nap and I was washing napkins. I looked down the road opposite our shack and saw a car approaching. That road, I was told, would take you all the way to Johannesburg. While hanging up the napkins I saw the big silver car stop near our shack. A man and a woman got out and walked towards me. She wore a flowing sari of floral chiffon and he a safari suit, just like those the friends of 'Oubaas' wore when they came to visit on Sundays.

She was smiling in a very friendly way and asked my name. I told her, and she asked if I would like to come to Cape Town to help her. She explained that they owned a large supermarket near the city and needed help. She asked if she could speak to Mama. I told her that Mama would be back soon and that Papa would be coming for his bread and coffee soon as it was almost lunch time. I took them inside and she sat down on the old wooden chair in our little kitchen while he stood with arms folded, looking around. He said, 'Look, we have no time to waste. Get done with your business quickly as we have a long journey back and you know what happens when I'm not at the shop.'

Finally I had to call Mama and tell her what the people wanted. At first she was adamant: 'Not on your life. You're not leaving here.' I begged and pleaded with her to let me go. Mama greeted them and they told her about the help they needed. She offered them tea but he refused. She said she could do with a cup. Papa came in from the fields and the man told him about their proposition for me. Papa didn't agree either, saying that the City was wicked and that I was only seventeen.

'I promise we will look after her and let her finish her schooling. That's a promise,' he said. Papa showed interest at this suggestion and enquired, 'But how can she go to school and work?'

'There are many schools in our area. She can go to night school. I promise we will treat her like one of the family.'

'I like her,' the woman said. 'Don't stand in her way. You won't regret it.'

Papa finally agreed and the man gave him twenty rands which he could not resist. God, how he must work a whole month for that sort of money!

While Mama was weeping silently, Papa asked, 'Do you rather want her to spend her young life here on this fucking farm like me? Since my childhood I've worked for them. Come now, it's best for her.'

'She can come home once a month, that's a promise.'

'I'm only glad that she can go to school. Look after my girl!' Mama assented.

I got into the big silver car and after all the goodbyes we slid away from the farm which I haven't seen again. For a long while I could still hear Manneljie crying for me. I really loved that child with his chubby cheeks. I sat back in the car and thought my whole life was going to change and silently thanked God. I prayed to Him to keep my family safe, and that there would be no more whippings. We drove on what seemed to be an endless road while the two in the front seats spoke about their friends, their new houses, and about new schemes to make more money.

We arrived at a large house with a shopping complex attached. I read the name 'Allie's Supermarket' written large across the front of the building. It looked grand with all the good fresh fruit displayed on the pavement and the pretty dresses in the windows. I thought that I would get a smart dress like those that I had seen in the magazine back home. He came round to her side and opened the car door for her. She told me that this was their shop. I stood on the pavement not knowing what to do. 'You go round the back and I'll come to show you around soon. Go through that big gate.'

I carried my case through the back gate and came face to face with a huge Alsatian dog. At first I wanted to scream with fright but I talked to him softly. 'Hello, boy. Hello, hello boy.' The dog wagged his tail and followed me to the back door. I sat on my case and waited and waited and became hungry. The dog remained sitting at my feet. The yard was wet and cold and the broken cement patches formed puddles of water. There were fruit boxes piled high. They smelled mouldy. I looked at my surroundings and felt like crying when I heard footsteps coming down the lane.

A man appeared with a heavy bag on his back. After he put the load down I saw this tall, black and handsome figure. He came towards me and said, 'Hello. You're coming to stay here?'

'Yes,' I whispered, the tears stinging my eyes. He saw this and became very sympathetic.

'Don't cry. What is your name?'

'Maria,' I answered and started weeping again. He took out a clean white handkerchief, as white as his strong teeth, and his lovely smile disarmed me. I wiped my tears shyly.

'Don't cry. I'll help you.' We heard footsteps approaching.

'Ben! Where the fucking hell are you?'

'Coming, baas. I was drinking water.'

'Now shake your arse, man,' the voice said angrily.

Ben wiped his face with the handkerchief which was now wet with my tears.

To pass the time I patted the dog and spoke to it. As Ben walked off he said, 'That's funny. That dog doesn't like strangers but he likes you.'

I sat in the wet yard for what seemed hours. Eventually she came out. 'My God, child! I was so busy behind the counter. Come, I'll show you your room. Here we are. This is not the farm so see that you keep it clean.' When she left I wanted to shout to her that I was hungry but she had disappeared.

It was a dull tiny room with a single iron bed, and a fruit box with a vase on it. I hung my jacket on a wire hanger and it was obvious that someone had lived here recently. She returned and said that Ben would have to sleep in the fruitshed. 'Can't trust those kaffirs. Come to the kitchen and eat something. You must be starved. My mother runs the house and she'll give you supper. What standard did you pass at school?'

'Standard Six, Missis.' Immediately I thought, here comes the shop assistant job and the night school. I felt relieved and glad as I entered the kitchen for my first meal in the city.

In the large American kitchen on a small table in the corner stood a plate of curry and a mug of tea. The food was strong but I was hungry. I sat looking around the big tiled kitchen with cupboards all matched in colour, like in the books back home.

The two teenage girls of the family came into the kitchen. They were about my age. One was so fat that she even had droopy cheeks and I could not see her neck. They walked past me as if I didn't exist, and opened the fridge, taking two bottles of cool-drink and opening them next to the table where I was eating. What a luxury, I thought, for the only cool-drinks I knew of came from a packet of powder that makes ten glasses. We only had the drinks on Sundays and I remember Manneljie gulping down one glass after another, hoping to fill his stomach to last till next Sunday, the little glutton!

The girls drank half of the bottles and dumped them on the main

table. Their grandmother asked them to clear the dinner table but they walked out grumbling, 'That will be the day,' and 'We've got homework to do.' The fat one opened the fridge again and I peeped inside and was amazed by so much food and drink. Only the whites have fridges like this one back home on the farm. We used to keep our food in a gauze wire cupboard which hung on a tree outside.

'Come, girl. I haven't got all night.'

I said grace and thanked the old lady.

'Here's the dishcloth. You can dry the dishes for me,' the old lady said in a frustrated voice. 'I don't know why they did not bring two girls. Expect me, with my old body, to be busy all day.'

I went on with the dishes.

'You're going to work in the shop. There's a lot of shoplifting going on lately. But they could've brought another girl to help me.'

I remembered the twenty rands which Papa could not resist. I bade her goodnight after I had finished the dishes and went through the wet yard to my room with the dog following me. Ben saw me passing and brought me a candle. I thanked him and asked him for something to read. He brought me the *Sunday Post*. The dog whined at the door until I let him in. I felt homesick when I read the depressing news of how people lived in Johannesburg. I dropped off to sleep with the newspaper in my hands.

The next morning I awoke to someone calling my name. 'Maria! Maria! Come, get up. Come clean the girls' shoes. You *must* wake up earlier. The girls must get to school in time.' The word school reminded me of her promise.

I sat at the back door cleaning their shoes which they took from me without even a thank you or a nod. My mind strayed to the previous night and to the cool-drinks which they had wasted.

Ben passed me with brooms and buckets and called me over to him.

'I hear you must stand guard for the day.'

'What does that mean?' I enquired.

'While I pack all the goods outside you must stand there and watch if anyone steals. There are a lot of people passing by. This is a busy area what with all the schools and the bus terminus and station nearby.'

'You mean I must stand there all day and just watch if people steal?'

'They trust no one,' Ben replied knowingly.

Every morning thereafter, after a mug of hot coffee and bread, I

would wash off the pavement. Ben had his section and I had mine. Buckets of soapy water were splashed over the pavement and then swept down the gutter. Then I was posted in front of the shop, begging people to come in to see the 'bargains' inside. I also had to look out for shoplifters. I hated every moment of this work. Some days the sun blazed down so fiercely that I felt faint. I watched with envy the girls from the different schools passing in the afternoons, wondering when I would be sent to school.

She fetched her daughters from school in the afternoon. They would get out of the big silver car and bang the doors shut. Running past me they would rush to the icecream counter inside the shop and come out licking large pink icecreams or suckers. Sometimes I felt hungry and tired but lunch often was just left-overs.

Sometimes Ben would pass me a sweet secretly and whisper, 'Don't let them see you eat.' He always came to talk to me or to give me something which he had taken in the shop without them noticing. I shall always remember him carrying the heavy sugar bags on his back.

One afternoon he came over and said, 'You look pale. Are you sick?'

'Yes,' I said, embarrassed.

'Don't let them see you cry like that. What is the matter?'

'My stomach is cramping so,' I replied.

He disappeared into the shop and after a while returned with a pack of sanitary towels. The blood had started to run down my legs. I was so grateful to him. I had to go inside the shop to ask permission to go to the toilet.

'Yes, and don't be long,' he said.

After I had cleaned myself up I walked back to the cursed job, watching people. If people stole they must be hungry, I reasoned. Standing in that busy street and watching everyone going somewhere. That night I felt so sick that I fell down on the bed into a deep sleep. I was sure that I was suffering from sunstroke. The dog slept in his usual place and I dreamt about Papa, Mama, Beta and Mannetjie. I was woken by a faint knocking at my door. I knew immediately it was Ben and I was glad of the opportunity to speak to someone again.

'Come in, Ben,' I said softly.

'How're you feeling now?'

'Fine, thanks. What is the time? You're still up? I've slept already.'

'Eleven o'clock. I had to pack the shelves in the shop. During the day it is too full of people.'

'They pay you well, Ben?'

'Not a damn. Here's a chocolate for you. Have it.'

'Thanks. You must be careful, Ben. I don't like these people. They'll send you to jail even for a chocolate bar.'

'I know. I want you to have it. I'm going to look after you.'

'I'm not a child, Ben.'

'Who cried like a big baby today?' he laughed. 'Why did you come to this place?'

'I thought it better than the farm and she promised to send me to high school. I want to learn more, Ben. That's why I came.'

'My girl, you won't even reach a schoolgate. These people don't keep their promises.'

After that night he came every evening and I loved him when he kissed me. He was so big and strong. We spoke about how much we loved each other and he even said that I was as pure as a lily. He always brought me little things from the shop. One night he brought me lipstick and mascara and held the mirror for me to make up my face. I was as thrilled as he for that was the first time I had used make-up. I knew I looked attractive and was shy when he said, 'Hell, you are beautiful.' That night we made love for the first time and fell fast asleep, oblivious of the danger of being found together. Later he woke me and said that we must get the hell out of that place.

'We can't get away from them, Ben. Don't talk about my family. I will have to learn to forget about them. I've got no money even to go and visit them. Besides, she doesn't let me off, even on Sundays.'

One night after a long day in the sun, I washed and got to bed early. He came in and pulled open the blankets and looking at my body he said, 'I've never seen such curves.' We laughed and read the newspaper.

'I must wake up at four o'clock tomorrow. It's market day and that man mustn't find me here. He asked me today why you never catch anyone stealing.'

'Must I say people steal if they don't? Don't worry, I'll wake you, Ben.' Then we fell asleep but our happiness was short-lived. The next morning we were woken to loud banging at the door.

'Come out of there, kaffir! And you, farm-bitch. Get out this minute. You can both go back to where you come from.'

We jumped up and dressed in a hurry. Ben looked worried.

'Don't worry,' I said kissing him and peeped through the window. It was still dark and the stars were still glowing brightly. The yard lights were on when we came out of the room.

'Pack your things and go,' he commanded.

'Where can we go?' Ben asked.

'You had time to think of that before.'

When we left he searched our bundles and locked the yard gate behind us.

'You can collect your papers at the Bantu Administration,' he sneered through the gate. 'You know what *that* means!'

We walked out of that cold wet yard into the misty dawn like two thieves. The lights in the huge house were still not switched on. The dog followed us as we walked towards the station. We avoided the main road because of the patrolling vans. We had no papers and the bundles made it obvious that we were now vagrants. We sat cuddled up, shivering with cold in the waiting room, hoping that the Railway Police wouldn't find us.

When the first train came along I said, 'Ben, where do we go from here?' He replied that he had friends at the Epping vegetable market and that I must wait for him on Cape Town station. I said that I would miss the dog and wondered if he wouldn't be killed by a car before he reached home or whether that damp yard wouldn't eventually claim him. Ben reassured me, saying that he would get me a dog when we had a place to stay. I knew that those two fat girls would not feed the dog. Even in the train I was still worried about the dog. It was then that Ben realised that he had left his passbook in his white jacket, in the fruitshed.

'I don't want to see that man again. Let the book rot there! I hate that book!'

We reached Cape Town and Ben said I should wait for him until he returned from Epping. I sat till lunch time thinking, what if he doesn't come back? Where will I get money to go back to the farm? I watched the throngs of people coming and going. They all looked so serious; everybody seemed to know where they were going. I wished I was one of them.

Ben finally returned soon after lunch time. I saw from his worried face that his journey had been in vain. He bought a packet of fish and chips and we ate hungrily.

'I found nothing. The shanties were all numbered last week and the people are afraid of taking in others for fear of having their homes bulldozed.'

We roamed the streets of Cape Town day after day, sleeping in

servants' rooms at night. Ben knew a lot of people, friends he had made when he used to come to Cape Town to the wholesalers for Allie's Supermarket. Days turned into months and we moved from place to place until we met his friend, Lucas. He pitied us as he felt we were so young. 'To live like this! I stay near the mountain. Come and live with me,' he told Ben.

We arrived at the mountain home which was just a large hole like a cave, with mattresses on the floor, but it was clean. 'This is better than the streets,' Ben said. That night Ben asked me if I'd rather go home to the farm or live there with him like this. Because I loved him I told him that I couldn't leave him. There were many others who lived like us. Outcasts of the city. Lucas had lost his wife a while back and I was accepted as the lady of the house.

One day while I was busy cleaning out our hole, making the beds and sweeping, Lucas came to tell me that they had arrested Ben. 'I expected something like this to happen,' he said.

'But why?' I asked unbelievably.

'Pass! He's got no papers!' Lucas replied.

I wept for a long time but I am still waiting for him. I lay down on the mattress and sobbed my heart out. Rita, one of the friends I came to know, tried to comfort me. 'Alright, my girl. Don't cry. Come let's have a drink.' I followed her and got drunk for the first time.

I lay on the grass in a drunken stupor and hated the nauseous feeling of everything revolving around me. In my drunken dream I saw his outstretched arms reaching for me: 'Ben, Ben? You've come to take me away from here?' Instead a fist smashed into the side of my face and the pain confused and alarmed me. I opened my eyes but could not focus properly nor could I lift my arms, which seemed so heavy, to protect myself. Vaguely in the distance I was sure I heard Rita's high-pitched sensual laughter. I shouted for assistance in the direction of the voice but received no answer.

Then I realised that the figure standing over me was not Ben's. He hit out at my face again. As I slipped into unconsciousness, I felt him tearing at my underwear and his heavy weight on me muffled my screams. No one heard or cared.

Mineworking

Greg Latter

When you come into Boksburg from the north-west, that is from the Johannesburg side, off the highway going west to Witbank, you see a sign: E.R.P.M. LIMITED — GOLD MINE. A big gold and green sign. Underneath it is a more modest sign saying 'Welcome to Boksburg'.

'As I was saying, my China. This bony had a vibe of its own. Check, I got a photo.'

Dick began to search through the papers, magazines, records and other junk that covered the floor in one corner of his room. It was an old garage that someone had converted into a bedroom. He rented it for next to nothing. Most places in Boksburg went for nothing. It was the rough part of town.

'Here it is.' He'd found the photo. 'Picked it up off a dude in Brakpan. A half-way job like, but me, I stripped it, did a re-bore and a re-work. Ag, it's not a very *lekker* photo. You can't check the colours. It's black, hey, with red tongues of fire — the frame is chromed. Genuine leather scoop saddle and ape bars. A real smooth ride.'

'I like it,' I said.

'Ja! But ask what happened to it, man. Come on, ask me.'

'All right,' I sipped my beer. 'What happened to it?'

'Shit, man! I wiped it out on Central Avenue. Fast, coming around the corner by the prison. Don't ask me. I don't know. Woke up in hospital — concussed, fractured, you name it — I had it!'

I also lived in the north. But further west, next to the golf course, E.R.P.M. Single Quarters. Dark rooms lived in by miners, shift-bosses, winch operators, mechanics, fitters, surveyors, even a male nurse and a clerk. The only woman was a toothless ex-boarding-school matron who looked after the place.

'Listen, Greg, the thing with a stope is this, my China. You got to watch it like a woman. The moment you stop supporting it, it runs away from you and Boom! — all the shit hits you when you're least ready for it.'

He was referring to pressure bursts. In mining language they are called 'bumps'. Technically, these occur when the pack-support hasn't kept pace with the mining face advancement. The pressure of unsupported rock rises until it can't be held any longer.

It explodes out at speeds of up to six metres per second. When

a thousand tons of rock hits you at six metres per second, you're usually dead.

The strange thing about a bump is that you only realise you've been in one after it's happened. It's that quick. A bang, the white dust of shattered rock, and slowly the screaming starts. It builds up, then the lights from the lamps appear as the workers dash between the packs in the worked-out areas, trying to find the gully. Once they are there, it's out along the gully into the tunnel running along the tracks to the station. If you don't ring for the cage to come to take them to surface, they'll kill you.

Once, more workers were injured running away from the scene of the burst than in the burst itself. They tripped over the sleepers, cracking knee-caps. First the survivors go up, then the injured, then the dead, if you can dig them out. You go up last.

I've been bumped twice. I got out the first time. The top of the stope I was in was a bad spot. I was still a learner, under an old miner called Oom Hennie. The heads of the stopes are the hottest spots in the mine. Very little ventilation up there. The air flow is deflected off the mining-face up into the worked-out areas and then into the gully so that it can find its way into the stope above.

The heat is unbearable. You walk ten metres down and there on the face cool air blows from a plant in the gully, but further up in the head it's hot and stale.

Anyway, this particular day wasn't unlike the others. The heat was evident, my eyes were stinging from the sweat. But I must tell you, I was getting used to it. Six days a week for six months I had been there. Four kilometres from surface.

Oom Hennie looked at me once in the morning. It took us 45 minutes to get from surface to stope 60. First the vertical shaft, then the small diesel loco to the sub-vertical; down that and into another loco that would take some of us to the east shaft, others to the west incline-shaft. Down the incline-shaft where we got out along the tunnel and into the stope. By the time we reached the working space, our overalls were wet with sweat.

Oom Hennie would look at me and then say, '*Boet — gaan kop-toe.*' I'd drag my sweaty body up to the head and start work. Every half hour or so I'd go down to where the gully meets the face for some cool air and there old Hennie would be sitting comfortably smoking his pipe and *twak*.

'How's it going up there?'

'All right, Oom, we're just putting in sandwich-pack.'

'*Goed, Boet.*'

I'd turn around and crawl back up. That was the only good thing about the head. It was such brittle ground that the hanging was high, maybe four metres in places. You could stand up easily, but in the stope it was only about a metre high, so you have to wear an arse-protector — a rubber mat tied to your bottom. Going up the face you'd crawl, but going down you'd slide on your bum.

The reef conglomerate ran at about 12 degrees so you had to mine on the same gradient. The working area, the stope, had to pursue that reef through dykes, faults and pure hard rock, no matter what. You couldn't see the glitter of gold in the conglomerate, just assorted pebbles, once the bed of some vast lake.

The day of the bump we were busy with a sandwich-pack. Some hanging rock had fallen during the night-shift and things were looking dangerous, so we had to put in supports. We had been busy on the job for about four hours when it hit.

The first thing I remember was this wrench, my overall pulling itself off my back. My hard-hat was knocked off. The lamp broke. I couldn't see anything — just thick dust then these beams of light cutting through it, off in the worked-out area.

I couldn't move my arm. My right arm. It was under rock, but it seemed all right. Twisting I reached behind me to feel my back. My hand came away sticky. Then I knew I was in shit. I shouted. There in front of me stood Oom Hennie. I didn't know it was him. He was just a black figure with this light coming out of his head. Then he spoke:

'Ja seun, first blood, hey? Don't worry, Oom Hennie'll look after you. Where you hurt?'

My back. I didn't know. I couldn't feel any pain. Just my breath keeping pace with time. Oom Hennie shone his light around. Slabs of disjointed rock were hanging above us. If we had an echo-bump we'd be gone. Oom Hennie swore. I'd never heard him swear like that.

He was pointing his lamp at something. I couldn't see what. Then this low moan came out of space behind me, a deep resonant gush of pain. It was the last thing I heard before I lost consciousness.

Coming out of it was a nightmare. For a few seconds I didn't know where I was. People were talking. I could see these faces, but the lamps were distorting them. Throwing them into grotesque masks. I fixed my eyes on a row of teeth. They were bobbing up and down. Then the teeth belonged to a mouth. The mouth to a

face and the face to a head. Oom Hennie.

I was in the cage being taken to surface. My body was strapped to a stretcher. The stretcher stood upright in the small cage. The movement that had distorted the faces was that of the cage as it squeaked and jostled its way to surface. Next to me was another stretcher with a body. I heard later that it was Mabonyane, a Shangaan who operated the jackhammer in the head. The last time I saw him he was tucked under a ledge at the face, drilling those endless holes. It was he who had let out that sound before I passed out. He died at the mine hospital from internal injuries.

Three weeks later I was back with Oom Hennie. All I had to show for the incident was an ugly scar running across my right shoulder-blade.

I still had Dick's photo in my hand. He cracked open another beer and gave it to me. I took a long drink. The frothy liquid exploded in my throat but it didn't quench anything. After two years underground my throat felt caked with dust forever. I burped. Dick laughed. We were both quiet for a while. That was how it always was. I'd be silent most of the evening and Dick would talk. Not all the time, but he had the kind of energy that would lie dormant for maybe a full minute and then rush up and release itself as a monologue. Inane talk that you could listen to with half an ear. I didn't wait to hear him. I downed my beer, picked up my helmet and took a fast ride back to the single quarters.

Bruiser was in the snooker room next to the mess. He had the table set up for a game. It wouldn't be the first time he'd caught me. He looked like a pig, a sweaty pig hanging onto the cue for support.

'Wanna play a game wif me?' Off the job Bruiser was drunk, permanently. Even on Sundays. Nobody refused Bruiser. The story was that he was a mercenary in the Congo but on the mines anyone who's a bully trying to forget his past is an ex-mercenary. What can you believe? Nobody ever challenged him over the issue. You just played your game and went to bed. If you were clever enough, you'd let him win without making it look too obvious.

Bruiser always wore the same jeans. Levi's with a red rubber belt which you couldn't see from the front because his belly hung over it. His shirts looked too small for him. You could see flesh bulging out between the buttonholes. He shaved once a week. On Sundays.

I met Bruiser the first day I went down. I got into the cage on

surface with Kourie, a Lebanese guy who started mining the same time as I did. We'd spent some time at the Training Centre together, but this was our first time down at E.R.P.M. We'd heard that they initiate you on your first day.

There were eight other miners in the cage. Mostly older than Kourie and me — Dick was there, so was Bruiser. They were all smiling.

Kourie whispered, 'Let them try. I'm the *moer-in* anyway.' He was stocky, tautly held, and when he spoke, he tightened the corners of his mouth. I felt all right getting into the cage with Kourie. I placed myself in the corner. Kourie was in front of me towards the centre. I looked up. There was a metal plate filled with holes above me. Boots were moving around on top of it.

The black workers never travelled with the whites, unless they were injured. They travelled in the same contraption, but above us. Before the cage dropped, they started singing. They knew we were below them. The sound was directed.

I saw Bruiser just as we pulled away. His cut-off-at-shoulder overalls were open. He had a tattoo on his chest. I couldn't make out what it was. He laughed out loud, then switched off his lamp. The other miners switched off, one after the other, until only Kourie and I were left.

My lamp was on my hard-hat, catching faces as I looked around. Kourie had his cord wound around his belt, the lamp dangling, the light picking up boots on the rusted metal floor. Chunky, black industrial boots. Boots, lamps and hard-hats. Sweat.

The crew above us grew silent. The singing stopped. They too switched off their lamps. Just Kourie and I now. The cage was picking up speed. Dropping. The initiation began. Someone wrenched my hard-hat off and my lamp went with it. I tried to pull it back by the cord but someone was kicking my hands. Suddenly, there was no light. Kourie had lost his too. Bruiser was laughing right in my face. He was laughing so loud it must have been him. He grabbed at my balls and I went onto my knees. Kourie was yelling and then something hit me on the side of the head. The cage was slowing down. Lamps were being turned on. I got to my feet and found my hard-hat. As I put it on, the doors opened. We were at the sub-vertical off-point.

Bruiser yanked me out of the cage by my belt. He was yelling something to the crane-driver at the wall. Then this cable dropped from the ceiling with a hook on the end. Bruiser grabbed it, hooking it under my belt. He signalled the driver and the cable

started going back. I was pulled up about 12 metres, left to hang. Bruiser got hold of a compressed air and water hose and he blasted me until I was spinning so much I lost sight of him.

When they let me down, I took two steps and dropped. The rest of them walked on ahead to catch the loco to incline-shaft. Kourie was among them, being pushed around. A mobile gauntlet. I puked in the drain. Next day, we were all friends.

If I didn't have a drink with Bruiser at the Red Lantern, he'd beat me up. I could drink more than him without getting drunk. He only needed two Scotches to get him pissed, but no matter how many more he drank, he'd be the same — nostalgia for a machine-gun and a black woman he'd met in some Congo village.

We were in the Red Lantern one night. Dick, Bruiser, Kourie was there, myself and a couple of other contractors. Bruiser had got hold of me after supper.

'Hey, Pally! Get your bike — we going for a *dop*.'

'I'm not into it, Bruiser.'

'That's okay, Pally. That's fine. Just come.'

I didn't push it. We got on our bikes and left the mess. Bruiser had one immaculate thing in his life and that was his 1 000 c.c. hog. And he could ride it! Give him a long corner to go into and, if you followed him, you could see the sparks as his exhausts touched tar. He lays the bike flat. A Kawasaki. I had a more regular bike. A Honda 4 750 c.c. My exhausts also had cornering scars but I no longer gunned it. I had fallen once and my nerve was no longer steady.

We pulled in at Dick's place and the three of us rode off to the Red Lantern, a bar at the Boksburg North Hotel. Dick and I parked in the street. Bruiser rode up to the entrance and put his bike on the pavement outside the swingdoors leading into the bar. Inside we met Kourie and the others — Jerk, Toots, Almeida and other miners from different shafts.

Kourie had really joined the gang. He'd fitted in well. I didn't spend much time with him, but when we were together the feeling was always tense. For some reason, the initiation had pulled us apart rather than together.

The walls were decorated with tourist pictures of Rome, Venice, Paris, Madrid and in one corner they had managed to find five pictures of Norway, which they had stuck one next to the other. The dartboard was to the left of the bar. Darts and drinking passed the time. We usually played 'killers'.

After about the fourth game, Dick waved a R10 note in the air

and challenged anyone for a game. Someone from the back of the bar took him up. I didn't know him. They played and Dick won. Then the trouble started.

The guy who lost wouldn't pay Dick his R10. He crossed the bar, picked up his jacket and started for the door with a friend of his behind him. They reached the swingdoors and Bruiser stopped them.

'Hey!' he shouted, deep in his throat and looking at his empty glass. 'Hey, China.' They turned to look at him.

Bruiser held the pause for as long as it takes a man to sweat. He turned to the rest of the bar. 'Someone lost his game and he won't cough up. Jaaaa. Hell, man. Play fair, Pally. Play fair.'

He picked up Dick's glass and gave it to him. 'Drink, Dick, then go fetch your winnings. You just hit the jackpot.'

Dick would have done nothing but Bruiser's voice lifted him to his full height and propelled him to the door. You could hear them breathing. Dick licked his lips and held out his hand. The hand trembled, then the other guy pulled the money out and gave it to him. The two of them walked out. I thought it was over, but then those guys made a big mistake — the kind you don't make twice. They pushed Bruiser's bike over. We were still sitting in a vacuum of silence when we heard the crash. I didn't even see Bruiser move to the door. All I could hear were these screams and thuds as he laid into them outside. After a moment, the screams stopped but the thuds carried on. Kourie and Dick went out to stop him. They couldn't do it. The rest of us went outside. I couldn't believe it. Bruiser had laid the two guys out on the pavement. He had then picked up his bike and dragged it over them. He was now standing on top of his bike, doing a dance to some silent music from a village deep in the Congo.

I kicked my bike into life and rode the highway to Johannesburg. I bought a roasted chicken at High Point and choked on the bones.

I was in the garden.

The trees were huge pines, ancient and spread-out so much that their branches spilled into one another. A thin tar road wound around a group of these trees. At the edge of the road stood the mess with its snooker room. The matron lived behind it. The rooms were to the left of the mess. A long, thin rectangular building with a dull, red corrugated iron roof. Opposite this was the gate, designated such by two blocks of concrete, one on either side. The fence was collapsing slowly. Between the mess, rooms and gate lay an umbrella of cool shade.

Cars were parked there to cool the fierceness of the sun. Bikes were tuned. Greetings exchanged. Beers drunk.

I'd been reflecting. Pushing things out. Almost placing them in an area that explained itself. Like thinking that Bruiser was a bully and nothing else. That settled him. Ejected him. And Kourie. We had started together, at the same time. It had put us on an equal footing. So equal that we felt a competitiveness. I ignore the competition, let him race his bike ahead whilst I stay behind, infuriating him and making it more tested.

But where do you take it to? I could talk to him, but I'd have to be careful. Restrained and polite. It's got to where we don't trust. Is Dick ever going to really say something to me? His bike. His chick. His beer. A game of darts? Is Bruiser so dumb?

Then the mine. The whole place. Its vastness that at every point is self-contained, self-sufficient. So big that it doesn't need me and I don't need it. Just this fat cheque at the end of the month. Keeping me there. I don't remember what I expected. I was tired from thinking it. The constant monologue. I looked up.

From under the umbrella, the trees took on a different form. Firstly, they had a funnel shape receding towards the sky. The colour was brown, not green. A web of small brown leafless sticks matted its way to the tree-tops. Under my feet the earth was brown and hard, with patches of motor-oil mottling the surface. No grass grew under the trees. They were older than the buildings. Ancient trees. They leant away from the road circling them, towards the centre.

I stepped out of the space, crossed the road and went up the steps to the rooms. On both sides of the steps stretched a flower-bed, long gone to waste. Parallel to this ran a concrete corridor with rooms leading onto it. Behind these rooms an identical corridor faced a fence which was the mine golf course boundary. I never played golf.

I climbed over the fence and went and sat on a log in the rough next to the fence. Three men and a woman. They were so drunk they didn't even see me. They approached slowly, walking on the side of the fairway. The woman was quite far behind, yelling obscenities. She was angry because she couldn't keep up with them. They waited for her and when she got to them they knocked her to the ground and fucked her. Before they finished, I left, quietly.

Every morning the same story. I'd get to work as the sun rose. In winter, I only saw the sun after work. Putting on overalls, boots,

a hard-hat and then strapping a battery to your waist with a cord with a lamp on its end, is a way of slipping into a different skin. There was the smell that went with it. It'd hit you the moment you walked into the change room.

First the smell of dried mud and then the stench from the piss trough. Even that didn't have a pure smell — it was blended with disinfectant. A must for the inspectors.

There were no change rooms for blacks. They came out, handed in their lamps and walked three kilometres through the veld to the compound. Singing, taking huge strides.

I'd been taken on a compound tour once. It was while I was still at Training College. We were introduced by our instructor as 'future' officials. It made me feel as though I still had to be something. I left the course for 'future' officials as soon as I got my blasting ticket.

The proud manager of the compound took a group of us slowly around. In a crisp, optimistic voice he described the fully-equipped, twenty-four-hour kitchen. Then he showed us how the beer was made and let us each drink a cupful. It was tasty, but the texture put me off. Lumpy porridge.

'If you don't give these bastards beer, they'll kill you. No respect. What they want, they've got to have. Savages mostly.' He spat on the floor. I think I noticed a slight Scots accent. 'They get issued,' he laboured on the word 'issued', 'with a kilo of fresh meat, raw hey! It's got to be raw. They like to prepare it themselves. They get it every day. In a yellow plastic dish. A kilo between six of them.'

'Six?' someone was interested.

'Ohhh ... yes. Six to a room, see. Here, I'll show you,' and he led the way in his khaki shorts and shirt, looking something between a policeman and a game ranger, to one of the blocks of rooms.

Needless to say, the rooms were depressing.

'Mostly Shangaans here. Did you know that?' We were tired of him. The attention had dwindled. 'Few Malawians, but they don't want to work, see. Not like a Shangaan. They come from Mozambique. Did you know that?'

'Bye-bye. Thank you. See you again some time.'

One night Bruiser visited me. He'd never come into my room before. I'd never gone into his. We all had to have a private space and anyway, the rooms were inhospitable and dark.

A cupboard, a dressing table, a bedside table with a lamp on it

and a bed. My ceiling had a patch of continuous moisture that looked like a piss mark.

I was reading a book when Bruiser entered. A book of poetry:

*Die Here het gekommel,
Maar die dice het verkeerd geval vir ons.
Dis maar al.*

He didn't knock, just pulled the gauze door open, pushed the inside door out and stood in the entrance.

I was lying on the bed. The lamp was on. He walked over to me and took the book out of my hands, looked at the cover, then threw it onto the dresser. It knocked a can of deodorant onto the floor. Mum for Men. The can tinkled around for a bit and then only the clock ticked.

I went bland. He'd only talk when I was sweating. That's why he felt happy underground. After half an hour underground, you sweat. In the Congo, you sweat. Bruiser enjoyed sweat the way a man likes to smell perfume in a cinema crowd.

I had socks on my feet. If only my boots were still on.

I lifted my body from the bed, still bland. Bruiser checked me. I sank back, licking my lips. The blandness was gone.

Bruiser spoke. 'I know you, punk. You give me a look like you don't believe a fucking thing I say. Well, you better believe this.'

The bastard. He was coming for me. Coming to get me in his bored, lazy way.

If I stayed lying down I was all right. Maybe he wouldn't hit me, but that wasn't what worried me. Not really. I wouldn't mind being hit. I knew he wouldn't hurt me — that would be like shitting on his own doorstep. He wanted to assert himself. To make me know him in the same disgusting way he knew himself. To mix sweat.

What worried me in that moment was my own fear. The fear of the scapegoat. An object of someone else's terror. Bruiser was getting to me.

Kourie walked past the room. He came back and stepped into it, into the silence. Bruiser lashed out at him. Kourie ducked out, missing the weapon of a punch, and Bruiser was gone, running after him, shouting obscenities.

I breathed.

I started to count. One, two, three, four, five ... and on.

Bruiser wouldn't come back. Kourie had taken my place. The next morning at breakfast, Bruiser smiled at me. That same day I

nearly lost my job.

About half-way through the shift, I was called down to the gully. The winch driver was dead already. The winch was still running, pulling its scraper filled with rock along the face. He'd left the controls running to go and untangle the cables. Somehow, they had become stuck together and were hindering the ease of pull. You could only guess how it happened. His assistant was too far away to hear the man. The cable must have caught his overalls and pulled him into the winch. He had gone into the cable barrel and the cable had carried on winding itself onto the drum and over him until it jammed the motor. He had a steel bracelet around his right wrist.

I vomited. Christ! What a job. I had to get out, out of that stinking fucking place before I exploded. Before I stopped feeling. Before Bruiser got to me. Before I sweated myself dry. Before it bumped. Before the cage just carried on past the sub-vertical into the dirty, hot hell at the bottom.

There was a commission of enquiry. I was found not guilty of irresponsibility. No one was to blame. An unfortunate accident. However, they'd needed only a few thousand more shifts to win the million fatality-free shift shield of their section. Tough shit!

Bruiser smiled at me when he heard about it.

The Prophetess

Njabulo Ndebele

The boy knocked timidly on the door, while a big fluffy dog sniffed at his ankles. That dog made him uneasy; he was afraid of strange dogs and this fear made him anxious to go into the house as soon as possible. But there was no answer to his knock. Should he simply turn the doorknob and get in? What would the prophetess say? Would she curse him? He was not sure now which he feared more: the prophetess or the dog. If he stood longer there at the door, the dog might soon decide that he was up to some mischief after all. If he left, the dog might decide he was running away. And the prophetess! What would she say when she eventually opened the door to find no one there? She might decide someone had been fooling, and would surely send lightning after the boy. But then, leaving would also bring the boy another problem: he would have to leave without the holy water for which his sick mother had sent him to the prophetess.

There was something strangely intriguing about the prophetess and holy water. All that one was to do, the boy had so many times heard in the streets of the township, was fill a bottle with water and take it to the prophetess. She would then lay her hands on the bottle and pray. And the water would be holy. And the water would have curing powers. That's what his mother had said too.

The boy knocked again, this time with more urgency. But he had to be careful not to annoy the prophetess. It was getting darker and the dog continued to sniff at his ankles. The boy tightened his grip round the neck of the bottle he had just filled with water from the street tap on the other side of the street, just opposite the prophetess's house. He would hit the dog with this bottle. What's more, if the bottle broke he would stab the dog with the sharp glass. But what would the prophetess say? She would probably curse him. The boy knocked again, but this time he heard the faint voice of a woman.

'Kena!' the voice said.

The boy quickly turned the knob and pushed. The door did not yield. And the dog growled. The boy turned the knob again and pushed. This time the dog gave a sharp bark, and the boy knocked frantically. Then he heard the bolt shoot back, and saw the door open to reveal darkness. Half the door seemed to have disappeared into the dark. The boy felt fur brush past his leg as

the dog scurried into the house.

'*Voetsek!*' the woman cursed suddenly.

The boy wondered whether the woman was the prophetess. But as he was wondering, the dog brushed past him again, slowly this time. In spite of himself, the boy felt a pleasant, tickling sensation and a slight warmth where the fur of the dog had touched him. The warmth did not last, but the tickling sensation lingered, going up the back of his neck and seeming to caress it. Then he shivered and the sensation disappeared, shaken off in the brief involuntary tremor.

'Dogs stay out!' shouted the woman, adding, 'This is not at the white man's.'

The boy heard a slow shuffle of soft leather shoes receding into the dark room. The woman must be moving away from the door, the boy thought. He followed into the house.

'Close the door,' ordered the woman who was still moving somewhere in the dark. But the boy had already done so.

Although it was getting dark outside, the room was much darker and the fading day threw some of its waning light into the room through the windows. The curtains had not yet been drawn. Was it an effort to save candles, the boy wondered. His mother had scolded him many times for lighting up before it was completely dark.

The boy looked instinctively towards the dull light coming in through the window. He was anxious, though, about where the woman was now, in the dark. Would she think he was afraid when she caught him looking out to the light? But the thick, dark green leaves of vine outside, lapping lazily against the window, attracted and held him like a spell. There was no comfort in that light; it merely reminded the boy of his fear, only a few minutes ago, when he walked under that dark tunnel of vine which arched over the path from the gate to the door. He had dared not touch that vine and its countless velvety, black, and juicy grapes that hung temptingly within reach, or rested lusciously on forked branches. Silhouetted against the darkening summer sky, the bunches of grapes had each looked like a cluster of small cones narrowing down to a point.

'Don't touch that vine!' was the warning almost everyone in Charterston township knew. It was said that the vine was all coated with thick, invisible glue. And that was how the prophetess caught all those who stole out in the night to steal her grapes. They would be glued there to the vine, and would be moaning for forgiveness

throughout the cold night, until the morning, when the prophetess would come out of the house with the first rays of the sun, raise her arms into the sky, and say: 'Away, away, sinful man; go and sin no more!' Suddenly, the thief would be free, and would walk away feeling a great release that turned him into a new man. That vine; it was on the lips of everyone in the township every summer.

One day when the boy had played truant with three of his friends, and they were coming back from town by bus, some grown-ups in the bus were arguing about the prophetess's vine. The bus was so full that it was hard for anyone to move. The three truant friends, having given their seats to grown-ups, pressed against each other in a line in the middle of the bus and could see most of the passengers.

'Not even a cow can tear away from that glue,' said a tall, dark man who had high cheek-bones. His balaclava was a careless heap on his head. His moustache, which had been finely rolled into two semi-circular horns, made him look fierce. And when he gesticulated with his tin lunch box, he looked fiercer still.

'My question is only one,' said a big woman whose big arms rested thickly on a bundle of washing on her lap. 'Have you ever seen a person caught there? Just answer that one question.' She spoke with finality, and threw her defiant scepticism outside at the receding scene of men cycling home from work in single file. The bus moved so close to them that the boy had feared the men might get hit.

'I have heard of one silly chap that got caught!' declared a young man. He was sitting with others on the long seat at the rear of the bus. They had all along been laughing and exchanging ribald jokes. The young man had thick lips and red eyes. As he spoke he applied the final touches of saliva with his tongue to brown paper rolled up with tobacco.

'When?' asked the big woman. 'Exactly when, I say? Who was that person?'

'These things really happen!' said a general chorus of women.

'That's what I know,' endorsed the man with the balaclava, and then added, 'You see, the problem with some women is that they will not listen; they have to oppose a man. They just have to.'

'What is that man saying now?' asked another woman. 'This matter started off very well, but this road you are now taking will get us lost.'

'That's what I'm saying too,' said the big woman, adjusting her

bundle of washing somewhat unnecessarily. She continued: 'A person shouldn't look this way or that, or take a corner here or there. Just face me straight: I asked a question.'

'These things really happen,' said the chorus again.

'That's it, good ladies, make your point; push very strongly,' shouted the young man at the back. 'Love is having women like you,' he added, much to the enjoyment of his friends. He was now smoking, and his rolled up cigarette looked small between his thick fingers.

'Although you have no respect,' said the big woman, 'I will let you know that this matter is no joke.'

'Of course this is not a joke!' shouted a new contributor. He spoke firmly and in English. His eyes seemed to burn with anger. He was young and immaculately dressed, his white shirt collar resting neatly on the collar of his jacket. A young nurse in a white uniform sat next to him. 'The mother there,' he continued, 'asks you very clearly whether you have ever seen a person caught by the supposed prophetess's supposed trap. Have you?'

'She didn't say that, man,' said the young man at the back, passing the roll to one of his friends. 'She only asked when this person was caught and who it was.' The boys at the back laughed. There was a lot of smoke now at the back of the bus.

'My question was,' said the big woman turning her head to glare at the young man, 'have you ever seen a person caught there? That's all.' Then she looked outside. She seemed angry now.

'Don't be angry, mother,' said the young man at the back. There was more laughter. 'I was only trying to understand,' he added.

'And that's our problem,' said the immaculately dressed man, addressing the bus. His voice was sure and strong. 'We laugh at everything; just stopping short of seriousness. Is it any wonder that the white man is still sitting on us? The mother there asked a very straightforward question, but she is answered vaguely about things happening. Then there is disrespectful laughter at the back there. The truth is you have no proof. None of you. Have you ever seen anybody caught by this prophetess? Never. It's all superstition. And so much about this prophetess also. Some of us are tired of her stories.'

There was a stunned silence in the bus. Only the heavy drone of an engine struggling with an overloaded bus could be heard. It was the man with the balaclava who broke the silence.

'Young man,' he said, 'by the look of things you must be a clever, educated person, but you just note one thing. The

prophetess might just be hearing all this, so don't be surprised when a bolt of lightning strikes you on a hot sunny day. And we shall be there at your funeral, young man, to say how you brought misfortune upon your head.'

Thus had the discussion ended. But the boy had remembered how, every summer, bottles of all sizes filled with liquids of all kinds of colours would dangle from vines and peach and apricot trees in many yards in the township. No one dared steal fruit from those trees. Who wanted to be glued in shame to a fruit tree? Strangely, though, only the prophetess's trees had no bottles hanging from their branches.

The boy turned his eyes away from the window and focused into the dark room. His eyes had adjusted slowly to the darkness, and he saw the dark form of the woman shuffling away from him. She probably wore those slippers that had a fluff on top. Old women seem to love them. Then a white receding object came into focus. The woman wore a white *doek* on her head. The boy's eyes followed the *doek*. It took a right-angled turn — probably round the table. And then the dark form of the table came into focus. The *doek* stopped, and the boy heard the screech of a chair being pulled; and the *doek* descended somewhat and was still. There was silence in the room. The boy wondered what to do. Should he grope for a chair? Or should he squat on the floor respectfully? Should he greet or wait to be greeted? One never knew with the prophetess. Why did his mother have to send him to this place? The fascinating stories about the prophetess, to which the boy would add graphic details as if he had also met her, were one thing; but being in her actual presence was another. The boy then became conscious of the smell of camphor. His mother always used camphor whenever she complained of pains in her joints. Was the prophetess ill then? Did she pray for her own water? Suddenly, the boy felt at ease, as if the discovery that a prophetess could also feel pain somehow made her explainable.

'Lumela 'me,' he greeted. Then he cleared his throat.

'Eea ngoanaka,' she responded. After a little while she asked: 'Is there something you want, little man?' It was a very thin voice. It would have been completely detached had it not been for a hint of tiredness in it. She breathed somewhat heavily. Then she coughed, cleared her throat, and coughed again. A mixture of rough discordant sounds filled the dark room as if everything was coming out of her insides, for she seemed to breathe out her cough from

deep within her. And the boy wondered: if she coughed too long, what would happen? Would something come out? A lung? The boy saw the form of the woman clearly now: she had bent forward somewhat. Did anything come out of her on to the floor? The cough subsided. The woman sat up and her hands fumbled with something around her breasts. A white cloth emerged. She leaned forward again, cupped her hands and spat into the cloth. Then she stood up and shuffled away into further darkness away from the boy. A door creaked, and the white *doek* disappeared. The boy wondered what to do because the prophetess had disappeared before he could say what he had come for. He waited.

More objects came into focus. Three white spots on the table emerged. They were placed diagonally across the table. Table mats. There was a small round black patch on the middle one. Because the prophetess was not in the room, the boy was bold enough to move near the table and touch the mats. They were crocheted mats. The boy remembered the huge lacing that his mother had crocheted for the church altar. ALL SAINTS CHURCH was crocheted all over the lacing. There were a number of designs of chalices that carried the Blood of our Lord.

Then the boy heard the sound of a match being struck. There were many attempts before the match finally caught fire. Soon, the dull, orange light of a candle came into the living room where the boy was, through a half closed door. More light flushed the living room as the woman came in carrying a candle. She looked round as if she was wondering where to put the candle. Then she saw the ashtray on the middle mat, pulled it towards her, sat down and turned the candle over into the ashtray. Hot wax dropped on to the ashtray. Then the prophetess turned the candle upright and pressed its bottom on to the wax. The candle held.

The prophetess now peered through the light of the candle at the boy. Her thick lips protruded, pulling the wrinkled skin and caving in the cheeks to form a kind of lip circle. She seemed always ready to kiss. There was a line tattooed from the forehead to the ridge of a nose that separated small eyes that were half closed by large, drooping eyelids. The white *doek* on her head was so huge that it made her face look small. She wore a green dress and a starched green cape that had many white crosses embroidered on it. Behind her, leaning against the wall, was a long bamboo cross.

The prophetess stood up again, and shuffled towards the window which was behind the boy. She closed the curtains and walked

back to her chair. The boy saw another big cross embroidered on the back of her cape. Before she sat down she picked up the bamboo cross and held it in front of her.

'What did you say you wanted, little man?' she asked slowly.

'My mother sent me to ask for water,' said the boy putting the bottle of water on the table.

'To ask for water?' she asked with mild exclamation, looking up at the bamboo cross. 'That is very strange. You came all the way from home to ask for water?'

'I mean,' said the boy, 'holy water.'

'Ahh!' exclaimed the prophetess, 'you did not say what you meant, little man.' She coughed, just once. 'Sit down, little man,' she said, and continued, 'You see, you should learn to say what you mean. Words, little man, are a gift from the Almighty, the Eternal Wisdom. He gave us all a little pinch of his mind and called on us to think. That is why it is folly to misuse words or not to know how to use them well. Now, who is your mother?'

'My mother?' asked the boy, confused by the sudden transition. 'My mother is staff nurse Masemola.'

'Ao!' exclaimed the prophetess, 'you are the son of the nurse? Does she have such a big man now?' She smiled a little and the lip circle opened. She smiled like a pretty woman who did not want to expose her cavities.

The boy relaxed somewhat, vaguely feeling safe because the prophetess knew his mother. This made him look away from the prophetess for a while, and he saw that there was a huge mask on the wall just opposite her. It was shining and black. It grinned all the time showing two canine teeth pointing upwards. About ten feet away at the other side of the wall was a picture of Jesus in which His chest was open, revealing His heart which had many shafts of light radiating from it.

'Your mother has a heart of gold, my son,' continued the prophetess. 'You are very fortunate, indeed, to have such a parent. Remember, when she says, "My boy, take this message to that house," go. When she says, "My boy, let me send you to the shop," go. And when she says, "My boy, pick up a book and read," pick up a book and read. In all this she is actually saying to you, learn and serve. Those two things, little man, are the greatest inheritance.'

Then the prophetess looked up at the bamboo cross as if she saw something in it that the boy could not see. She seemed to lose her breath for a while. She coughed deeply again, after which

she went silent, her cheeks moving as if she was chewing.

'Bring the bottle nearer,' she said finally. She put one hand on the bottle while with the other she held the bamboo cross. Her eyes closed, she turned her face towards the ceiling. The boy saw that her face seemed to have contracted into an intense concentration in such a way that the wrinkles seemed to have become deep gorges. Then she began to speak.

'You will not know this hymn, boy, so listen. Always listen to new things. Then try to create too. Just as I have learnt never to page through the dead leaves of hymn books.' And she began to sing.

*If the fish in a river
boiled by the midday sun
can wait for the coming of evening,
we too can wait
in this wind-frosted land,
the spring will come,
the spring will come.
If the reeds in winter
can dry up and seem dead
and then rise
in the spring,
we too will survive the fire that is coming
the fire that is coming,
we too will survive the fire that is coming.*

It was a long, slow song. Slowly, the prophetess began to pray.

'God, the All Powerful! When called upon, You always listen. We direct our hearts and thoughts to You. How else could it be? There is so much evil in the world; so much emptiness in our hearts; so much debasement of the mind. But You, God of all power, are the wind that sweeps away evil and fills our hearts and minds with renewed strength and hope. Remember Samson? Of course You do, O Lord. You created him, You, maker of all things. You brought him out of a barren woman's womb, and since then, we have known that out of the desert things will grow, and that what grows out of the barren wastes has a strength that can never be destroyed.'

Suddenly, the candle flame went down. The light seemed to have gone into retreat as the darkness loomed out, seemingly out of the very light itself, and bore down upon it, until there was a tiny blue flame on the table looking so vulnerable and so strong at the

same time. The boy shuddered and felt the coldness of the floor going up his bare feet.

Then out of the dark, came the prophetess's laugh. It began as a giggle, the kind the girls would make when the boy and his friends chased them down the street for a little kiss. The giggle broke into the kind of laughter that produced tears when one was very happy. There was a kind of strange pleasurable rhythm to it that gave the boy a momentary enjoyment of the dark, but the laugh gave way to a long shriek. The boy wanted to rush out of the house. But something strong, yet intangible, held him fast to where he was. It was probably the shriek itself that had filled the dark room and now seemed to come out of the mask on the wall. The boy felt like throwing himself on the floor to wriggle and roll like a snake until he became tired and fell into a long sleep at the end of which would be the kind of bliss the boy would feel when he was happy and his mother was happy and she embraced him, so closely.

But the giggle, the laugh, the shriek, all ended as abruptly as they had started as the darkness swiftly receded from the candle like the way ripples run away from where a stone has been thrown in the water. And there was light. On the wall, the mask smiled silently, and the heart of Jesus sent out yellow light.

'Lord, Lord, Lord,' said the prophetess slowly in a quiet, surprisingly full voice which carried the same kind of contentment that had been in the voice of the boy's mother when one day he had come home from playing in the street, and she was seated on the chair close to the kitchen door, just opposite the warm stove. And as soon as she saw him come in, she embraced him all the while saying: 'I've been so ill; for so long, but I've got you. You're my son. You're my son. You're my son.'

And the boy had smelled the faint smell of camphor on her, and he too embraced her, holding her firmly although his arms could not go beyond his mother's armpits. He remembered how warm his hands had become in her armpits.

'Lord, Lord, Lord,' continued the prophetess, 'have mercy on the desert in our hearts and in our thoughts. Have mercy. Bless this water; fill it with your power; and may it bring rebirth. Let her and all others who will drink of it feel the flower of newness spring alive in them; let those who drink it, break the chains of despair, and may they realise that the desert wastes are really not barren, but the vast sands that stretch into the horizon are the measure of the seed in us.'

As the prophetess stopped speaking, she slowly lowered the bamboo cross until it rested on the floor. The boy wondered if it was all over now. Should he stand up and get the blessed water and leave? But the prophetess soon gave him direction.

'Come here, my son,' she said, 'and kneel before me here.' The boy stood up and walked slowly towards the prophetess. He knelt on the floor, his hands hanging at his sides. The prophetess placed her hands on his head. They were warm, and the warmth seemed to go through his hair, penetrating deep through his scalp into the very centre of his head. Perhaps, he thought, that was the soul of the prophetess going into him. Wasn't it said that when the prophetess placed her hands on a person's head, she was seeing with her soul deep into that person; that, as a result, the prophetess could never be deceived? And the boy wondered how his lungs looked to her. Did she see the water that he had drunk from the tap just across the street? Where was the water now? In the stomach? In the kidneys?

Then the hands of the prophetess moved all over the boy's head, seeming to feel for something. They went down the neck. They seemed cooler now, and the coolness seemed to tickle the boy for his neck was colder than those hands. Now they covered his face, and he saw, just before he closed his eyes, the skin folds on the hands so close to his eyes that they looked like many mountains. Those hands smelled of blue soap and candle wax. But there was no smell of snuff. The boy wondered. Perhaps the prophetess did not use snuff after all. But the boy's grandmother did, and her hands always smelled of snuff. Then the prophetess spoke.

'My son,' she said, 'we are made of all that is in the world. Go. Go and heal your mother.' When she removed her hands from the boy's face, he felt his face grow cold, and there was a slight sensation of his skin shrinking. He rose from the floor, lifted the bottle with its snout, and backed away from the prophetess. He then turned and walked towards the door. As he closed it, he saw the prophetess shuffling away to the bedroom carrying the candle with her. He wondered when she would return the ashtray to the table. When he finally closed the door, the living room was dark, and there was light in the bedroom.

It was night outside. The boy stood on the veranda for a while, wanting his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He wondered also about the dog. But it did not seem to be around. And there was that vine archway with its forbidden fruit and the multicoloured

worms that always crawled all over the vine. As the boy walked under the tunnel of vine, he tensed his neck, lowering his head as people do when walking in the rain. He was anticipating the reflex action of shaking off a falling worm. Those worms were disgustingly huge, he thought. And there was also something terrifying about their bright colours.

In the middle of the tunnel, the boy broke into a run and was out of the gate: free. He thought of his mother waiting for the holy water; and he broke into a sprint, running west up Thiye Street towards home. As he got to the end of the street, he heard the hum of the noise that came from the ever-crowded barber shops and the huge beer hall just behind those shops. After the brief retreat in the house of the prophetess, the noise, the people, the shops, the street lights, the buses and the taxis all seemed new. Yet, somehow, he wanted to avoid any contact with all this activity. If he turned left at the corner, he would have to go past the shops into the lit Moshoeshoe Street and its Friday night crowds. If he went right, he would have to go past the now dark, ghostly Bantu-Batho post office, and then down through the huge gum trees behind the Charterston Clinic, and then past the quiet golf course. The latter way would be faster, but too dark and dangerous for a mere boy, even with the spirit of the prophetess in him. And were not dead bodies found there sometimes? The boy turned left.

At the shops, the boy slowed down to manoeuvre through the crowds. He lifted the bottle to his chest and supported it from below with the other hand. He must hold on to that bottle. He was going to heal his mother. He tightened the bottle cap. Not a drop was to be lost. The boy passed the shops.

Under a street lamp just a few feet from the gate into the beer hall was a gang of boys standing in a tight circle. The boy slowed down to an anxious stroll. Who were they, he wondered. He would have to run past them quickly. No, there would be no need. He recognised Timi and Bubus. They were with the rest of the gang from the boy's neighbourhood. Those were the bigger boys who were either in Standard Six or were already in secondary school or were now working in town.

Timi recognised the boy.

'Ja, sonny boy,' greeted Timi. 'What's a picaninny like you doing alone in the streets at night?'

'Heit, bra Timi,' said the boy, returning the greeting. 'Just from the shops, bra Timi,' he lied, not wanting to reveal his real mission. Somehow that would not have been appropriate.

'Come on, you!' yelled another member of the gang, glaring at Timi. It was Biza. Most of the times when the boy had seen Biza, the latter was stopping a girl and talking to her. Sometimes the girl would laugh. Sometimes Biza would twist her arm until she 'agreed'. In broad daylight!

'You don't believe me,' continued Biza to Timi, 'and when I try to show you some proof you turn away to greet an ant.'

'Okay then,' said another, 'what proof do you have? Everybody knows that Sonto is a hard girl to get.'

'Come closer then,' said Biza, 'and I'll show you.' The boy was closed out of the circle as the gang closed in towards Biza, who was at the centre. The boy became curious and got closer. The wall was impenetrable. But he could clearly hear Biza.

'You see? You can all see. I've just come from that girl. Look! See? The liquid? See? When I touch it with my finger and then leave it, it follows like a spider's web.'

'Well, my man,' said someone, 'you can't deceive anybody with that. It's the usual trick. A fellow just blows his nose and then applies the mucus there, and then emerges out of the dark saying he has just had a girl.'

'Let's look again closely,' said another, 'before we decide one way or the other.' And the gang pressed close again.

'You see? You see?' Biza kept saying.

'I think Biza has had that girl,' said someone.

'It's mucus man, and nothing else,' said another.

'But you know Biza's record in these matters, gents.'

'Another thing, how do we know it's Sonto and not some other girl. Where is it written on Biza's cigar that he has just had Sonto? Show me where it's written "Sonto" there.'

'You're jealous, you guys, that's your problem,' said Biza. The circle went loose and there was just enough time for the boy to see Biza's penis disappear into his trousers. A thick little thing, thought the boy. It looked sad. It had first been squeezed in retreat against the fly like a concertina, before it finally disappeared. Then Biza, with a twitch of alarm across his face, saw the boy.

'What did you see, you?' screamed Biza. 'Fuck off!'

The boy took to his heels wondering what Biza could have been doing with his penis under the street lamp. It was funny, whatever it was. It was silly too. Sinful. The boy was glad that he had got the holy water away from those boys and that none of them had touched the bottle.

And the teachers were right, thought the boy. Silliness was all

those boys knew. And then they would go to school and fail test after test. Silliness and school did not go together.

The boy felt strangely superior. He had the power of the prophethess in him. And he was going to pass that power to his mother, and heal her. Those boys were not healing their mothers. They just left their mothers alone at home. The boy increased his speed. He had to get home quickly. He turned right at the charge office and sped towards the clinic. He crossed the road that went to town and entered Mayaba Street. Mayaba Street was dark and the boy could not see. But he did not lower his speed. Home was near now, instinct would take him there. His eyes would adjust to the darkness as he raced along. He lowered the bottle from his chest and let it hang at his side, like a pendulum that was not moving. He looked up at the sky as if light would come from the stars high up to lead him home. But when he lowered his face, he saw something suddenly loom before him, and, almost simultaneously, felt a dull yet painful impact against his thigh. Then there was a grating of metal seeming to scoop up sand from the street. The boy did not remember how he fell but, on the ground, he lay clutching his painful thigh. A few feet away, a man groaned and cursed.

'Blasted child!' he shouted. 'Shouldn't I kick you? Just running in the street as if you owned it. Shit of a child, you don't even pay tax. Fuck off home before I do more damage to you!' The man lifted his bicycle, and the boy saw him straightening the handles. And the man rode away.

The boy raised himself from the ground and began to limp home, conscious of nothing but the pain in his thigh. But it was not long before he felt a jab of pain at the centre of his chest and his heart beating faster. He was thinking of the broken bottle and the spilt holy water and his mother waiting for him and the water that would help to cure her. What would his mother say? If only he had not stopped to see those silly boys he might not have been run over by a bicycle. Should he go back to the prophethess? No. There was the dog, there was the vine, there were the worms. There was the prophethess herself. She would not let anyone who wasted her prayers get away without punishment. Would it be lightning? Would it be the fire of hell? What would it be? The boy limped home to face his mother. He would walk in to his doom. He would walk into his mother's bedroom, carrying no cure, and face the pain in her sad eyes.

But as the boy entered the yard of his home, he heard the

sound of bottles coming from where his dog had its kennel. Rex had jumped over the bottles, knocking some stones against them in his rush to meet the boy. And the boy remembered the pile of bottles next to the kennel. He felt grateful as he embraced the dog. He selected a bottle from the heap. Calmly, as if he had known all the time what he would do in such a situation, the boy walked out of the yard again, towards the street tap on Mayaba Street. And there, almost mechanically, he cleaned the bottle, shaking it many times with clean water. Finally, he filled it with water and wiped its outside clean against his trousers. He tightened the cap, and limped home.

As soon as he opened the door, he heard his mother's voice in the bedroom. It seemed some visitors had come while he was away.

'I'm telling you *Sisi*,' his mother was saying, 'and take it from me, a trained nurse. Pills, medicines, and all those injections, are not enough. I take herbs too, and then think of the wonders of the universe as our people have always done. Son, is that you?'

'Yes, Ma,' said the boy who had just closed the door with a deliberate bang.

'And did you bring the water?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'Good. I knew you would. Bring the water and three cups. MaShange and MaMokoena are here.'

The boy's eyes misted with tears. His mother's trust in him: would he repay it with such dishonesty? He would have to be calm. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and then put the bottle and three cups on a tray. He would have to walk straight. He would have to hide the pain in his thigh. He would have to smile at his mother. He would have to smile at the visitors. He picked up the tray; but just before he entered the passage leading to the bedroom, he stopped, trying to muster courage. The voices of the women in the bedroom reached him clearly.

'I hear you very well, Nurse,' said one of the women. 'It is that kind of sense I was trying to spread before the minds of these people. You see, the two children are first cousins. The same blood runs through them.'

'That close!' exclaimed the boy's mother.

'Yes, that close. MaMokoena here can bear me out; I told them in her presence. Tell the nurse, you were there.'

'I have never seen such people in all my life,' affirmed MaMokoena.

'So I say to them, my voice reaching up to the ceiling, "Hey, you people, I have seen many years. If these two children really want to marry each other, then a beast *has* to be slaughtered to cancel the ties of blood" '

'And do you want to hear what they said?' interrupted MaMokoena.

'I'm listening with both ears,' said the boy's mother.

'Tell her, child of Shange,' said MaMokoena.

'They said that was old, crusted foolishness. So I said to myself, "Daughter of Shange, shut your mouth, sit back, open your eyes, and watch." And that's what I did.'

'Two weeks before the marriage, the ancestors struck. Just as I had thought. The girl had to be rushed to hospital, her legs swollen like trousers full of air on the washing line. Then I got my chance, and opened my mouth, pointing my finger at them, and said, "Did you ask the ancestors' permission for this unacceptable marriage?" You should have seen their necks becoming as flexible as a goose's. They looked this way, and looked that way, but never at me. But my words had sunk. And before the sun went down, we were eating the insides of a goat. A week later, the children walked up to the altar. And the priest said to them, "You are such beautiful children!" '

'Isn't it terrible that some people just let misfortune fall upon them?' remarked the boy's mother.

'Only those who ignore the words of the world speaking to them,' said MaShange.

'Where is this boy now?' said the boy's mother. 'Son! Is the water coming?'

Instinctively the boy looked down at his legs. Would the pain in his thigh lead to the swelling of his legs? Or would it be because of his deception? A tremor of fear went through him; but he had to control it, and be steady, or the bottle of water would topple over. He stepped forward into the passage. There was his mother! Her bed faced the passage, and he had seen her as soon as he turned into the passage. She had propped herself up with many pillows. Their eyes met, and she smiled, showing the gap in her upper front teeth that she liked to poke her tongue into. She wore a fawn chiffon *doek* which had slanted into a careless heap on one side of her head. This exposed her undone hair on the other side of her head.

As the boy entered the bedroom, he smelled camphor. He greeted the two visitors and noticed that, although it was warm in

the bedroom, MaShange, whom he knew, wore her huge, heavy, black, and shining overcoat. MaMokoena had a blanket over her shoulders. Their *doeks* were more orderly than the boy's mother's. The boy placed the tray on the dressing chest close to his mother's bed. He stepped back and watched his mother, not sure whether he should go back to the kitchen, or wait to meet his doom.

'I don't know what I would do without this boy,' said the mother as she leaned on an elbow, lifted the bottle with the other hand, and turned the cap rather laboriously with the hand on whose elbow she was resting. The boy wanted to help, but he felt he couldn't move. The mother poured water into one cup, drank from it briefly, turned her face towards the ceiling, and closed her eyes. 'Such cool water!' she sighed deeply, and added, 'Now I can pour for you,' as she poured water into the other two cups.

There was such a glow of warmth in the boy as he watched his mother, so much gladness in him that he forgave himself. What had the prophetess seen in him? Did she still feel him in her hands? Did she know what he had just done? Did holy water taste any differently from ordinary water? His mother didn't seem to find any difference. Would she be healed?

'As we drink the prophetess's water,' said MaShange, 'we want to say how grateful we are that we came to see for ourselves how you are.'

'I think I feel better already. This water, and you ... I can feel a soothing coolness deep down.'

As the boy slowly went out of the bedroom, he felt the pain in his leg, and felt grateful. He had healed his mother. He would heal her tomorrow, and always with all the water in the world. He had healed her.



Caroline Cullinan

Mamlambo

Bheki Maseko

Mamlambo is a kind of snake that brings fortune to anyone who accommodates it. One's money or livestock multiplies incredibly.

This snake is available from traditional doctors who provide instructions regarding its exploitation. Certain necessities are to be sacrificed in order to maintain it. Sometimes you may have to sacrifice your own children, or go without a car or clothes. It all depends on the instructions of the doctor concerned.

The duties involved are so numerous that some people tend to forget some of them. A beast must be slaughtered from time to time, and failing to comply with the instructions results in disaster. It is said that this monster can kill an entire family always starting with the children and leaving its owner for last.

Getting rid of this fortune snake is not an easy task when one has had enough of luck and sacrificing. Some say a beast must be slaughtered, then the entire carcass must be enfolded with the skin and thrown away. This is done in the presence of an indigenous doctor who performs the necessary ritual to the end.

Someone will come along, pick up a shiny object, and Mamlambo is his. There are many things said about this monster.

Here is an account of how Sophie acquired Mamlambo and what happened to her.

Sophie Zikode was a young, pretty, ebony-faced woman with a plump and intact moderate body. Ever since she came to stay in the Golden City to work as a domestic servant, she never had a steady boyfriend. The only man who lasted longer than any other was Elias Malinga who was from Ermelo. He was the first man she met when she came to Johannesburg and he was the only man she truly loved.

She was so obsessed with love that she readily abandoned any possessions or habits that Elias disliked. In spite of the priority his children and wife in Ermelo enjoyed, she was still prepared to marry Elias Malinga without the slightest intention of disrupting his marriage during their love affair.

One day, after a quarrel, Elias went away and never came back again. She phoned his place of employment to be told by a friend of Elias that he (Elias) had had enough of her. She never heard from him ever again.

After Elias, Sophie never again had a steady boyfriend. They all deserted her after two or three months. But it no longer hurt. The only name that haunted her day and night was Elias.

Ever since Elias left her she had never loved anybody else. All she wanted now was a husband she could be loyal to. But she could not find one. Then along came Jonas, a tall well-built Malawian who was much more considerate than any of the other men.

For the first time in her young life a thought came into her mind. She must consult a traditional doctor for help. She wanted to keep Jonas forever. She must see Baba Majola first thing in the morning.

The following morning Sophie visited Baba Majola who was a street cleaner. The old man listened sympathetically to her problem while he swept rubbish out of a gutter. He told her to return at four in the afternoon. Sophie was there on time.

Baba Majola gave her a smelly sticky stuff in a bottle. He told her to rub her whole body with it before her boyfriend came, and to put it under the pillow when they slept. The poor girl agreed amicably.

She did exactly as she had been told to do. She felt guilty as the atmosphere became tense in the little room.

They ate in silence as the clock on the small table ticked away, disturbing the deep silence. Jonas was not his usual self today. He was quiet in a strange manner.

They were sleeping for some minutes when Jonas felt something peculiar under the pillow. It felt cold and smooth.

'Sophie, Sophie,' he called, shaking her gently. 'What is this under the pillow?'

Sophie had felt the strange object soon after they had climbed into bed. But she had been scared to ask Jonas what it was.

'I don't know,' she replied pretending to be sleepy. 'Switch on the light, let's have a look.'

With a trembling hand Jonas fumbled for the switch. 'Gosh, what a big snake!'

Jonas was the first to jump out of bed. Sophie followed. They fiddled with the door until it was open and ran into the brightly lit street.

Semi-naked, they knocked at the servant's room of a house in the neighbourhood to wake up a friend of Sophie's. Sophie's friend was very stunned to find them in that manner.

Quickly they explained the situation and together they went back to Sophie's room. Through the window they could see the snake, lying across the bed. Sophie was very scared, but Jonas, Christ! Jonas, he could hardly speak.

Realising that things were bad, Sophie decided to tell the whole truth. She told Jonas she did it 'because I wanted to keep you forever.' They decided to go to a traditional doctor who stayed a few streets away.

They knocked and after waiting a while, the doctor answered. He opened the door but quickly closed it again. They heard him say: 'Wait outside there. I can sense something melancholy.'

They could hear the indigenous doctor saying something in a

strange language, and the smell of burning *muti* came to them in full force.

He began to moan as if speaking to gods in a faraway land. He then opened the door and enquired what their problem was. Sophie retold her story.

'Oh, my girl. What you have in your room is Mamlambo,' he shuddered.

'What? Mamlambo!' cried Sophie. 'Oh God, what have I done to deserve such punishment? What big sin have I committed to be punished in this manner?' Tears streamed continuously down her cheeks.

'Crying won't solve the problem, my dear girl,' intervened the doctor in broken Zulu. 'The only solution is to get rid of the snake, and I need your cooperation to do that. I'll give you a suitcase to take to your room, and the snake....'

'What!' cried Sophie. 'Must I go back to that room again? Oh, no, not me, I'm sorry.'

'The choice is yours, my girl. You either keep it or get rid of it. The sooner the better because if you don't it will be with you wherever you go. It is your snake. The witchdoctor was tired of it so he transferred it to you. So you are duty bound to transfer it to someone else or keep it.'

'Transfer it to someone else! Oh no! Why don't we throw it into the river or somewhere,' Sophie grumbled.

'You can't. Either you transfer it, or you keep it. Do you want my help or what?' asked the doctor in a businesslike manner.

'Yes,' Sophie agreed in a tired voice, eyeing her friend, Sheila and the timid Jonas, with the 'I hate to do it' look.

The traditional doctor took a large suitcase from the top of the wardrobe, put some *muti* inside, burnt it. He moaned again as if speaking to gods they could not see. He chanted on in this manner for what seemed like ages.

'You'll take this suitcase to your room and put it next to your bed. The snake will roll itself into the suitcase.' He saw that Sophie was doubtful so he added: 'It's your snake. It won't harm you.' He continued: 'You will then go to a busy place and give it to someone. That you will figure out for yourself.'

They all went back to Sophie's room. The big snake was still there. Having told herself to 'come what may', Sophie tiptoed into the room and put the suitcase next to the bed.

Slowly, as if it were smelling something, the snake lifted its head, slid into the suitcase and gathered itself into a neat coil.

Her mind was obsessed with Johannesburg station where she would give Mamlambo to someone for good. She walked quickly towards the taxi rank, impervious to the weight of the suitcase.

She did not want to do this to anyone but she had no option.

Remembering that taxis were scarce after eight, she quickened her pace. She saw a few police cars patrolling, probably because of the high rate of housebreaking in the area, she thought.

It was while she was daydreaming at the bus-stop that she realised the car at the traffic lights was a patrol car headed in her direction. Should she drop the suitcase and run? But they had already seen her and she would not get far. How will she explain the whole thing to the police? Will they believe her story? The news will spread like wildfire that she's a witch. What would Elias think of her?

'What are you doing here at this time?' asked the passenger policeman.

'I'm waiting for a taxi, I'm going to the station,' answered Sophie, surprised that her voice was steady.

'We don't want to find you here when we come back,' commanded the policeman eyeing the suitcase. The car screeched away.

She was relieved when the taxi appeared. The driver loaded the suitcase in the boot, asking what was so heavy. She simply told him it was groceries.

There were two other passengers in the taxi who both got off before the taxi reached the city.

'Are you going to the station?' enquired the driver inquisitively.

'No, I'm going to the bus terminus,' Sophie replied indifferently.

'I know you are going to the station and I'm taking you there,' insisted the man.

'You can't take me to the station,' said Sophie, indignant. 'I'm going to Main Street next to the bus terminus.'

Ignoring her he drove straight to the station, smiling all the way. When they reached the station he got out of the car and took the suitcase from the boot.

Sophie paid him and gestured that she wanted her suitcase. But the man ignored her.

'To which platform are you going? I want to take you there.'

'I don't want your help at all. Give me my suitcase and leave me alone,' she urged, beginning to feel real hot under the collar.

'Or are you going to the luggage office?' mocked the man going towards the brightly lit office.

Sophie was undecided. Should she leave the suitcase with this man and vanish from the scene. Or should she just wait and see what happened? What was this man up to? Did he know what was in the suitcase or was he simply inquisitive? Even if she bolted he would find her easily. If only she had brought someone with her.

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by anger. Something told her to take her suitcase from the man by force. He had no business to interfere in her affairs. She went straight into the office, pulled the suitcase from between the man's legs, and stormed out.

Stiff-legged she walked towards the station platform feeling eyes following her. She zig-zagged through the crowds, deaf to the pandemonium of voices and music blaring from various radios. She hoped the taxi driver wasn't following her but wouldn't dare look back to see.

'Hey you, girl! Where do you think you're going?' It was the voice of the taxi driver.

She stopped dead in her tracks without turning. She felt a lump in her throat and tears began to fall down her cheeks. She was really annoyed. Without thinking she turned and screamed at the man.

'What do you want from me! What on earth do you want!'

With his worn-out cap tipped to the right and his hands deep in his khaki dustcoat pockets, the smiling man was as cool as ever. This angered Sophie even more.

'You are running away and you are trying to erase traces,' challenged the taxi driver indifferently, fingering his cap time and again.

'What's the matter?' asked a policeman who had been watching from a distance.

'This man has been following me from the bus rank and is still following me. I don't know what he wants from me,' cried Sophie.

'This woman is a liar. She boarded my taxi and she's been nervous all the way from Kensington. I suspect she's running away from something. She's a crook,' emphasised the taxi driver looking for approval at the crowd that had gathered around them.

'You are a liar! I never boarded your taxi and I don't know you. You followed me when I left the bus rank.' Sophie wept, tears running freely down her cheeks.

'Let her open the suitcase and let's see what's inside.' Sheepish Smile went for the suitcase.

'All right. All right.' The policeman intervened. 'Quiet everybody.'

I do the talking now. Young man,' he said, 'do you know this woman?'

'I picked her up at Kens....'

'I say do you know her?'

'Yes, she was in my taxi....'

'Listen young man,' said the policeman beginning to get angry. 'I'm asking you a straight-forward question and I want a straight-forward answer. I'm asking you for the last time now. I-say-do-you-know-this-woman?' He pointed emphatically at Sophie.

'No, I don't know her,' replied Sheepish Smile reluctantly, adjusting his cap once again.

'Did she offend you in any manner?'

'No,' he replied shamefaced.

'Off you go then. Before I arrest you for public disturbance,' barked the policeman pointing in the direction from which the man had come. Then he turned to Sophie.

'My child, go where you are going. This rascal has no business to interfere in your affairs.'

Relieved, she picked up her suitcase, thanked the policeman and walked towards platform fourteen as the policeman dispersed the people and told them to mind their own business.

Platform fourteen. The old lady grew impatient. What's holding him? she thought. She came bi-monthly for her pension pay and each time the taxi dropped them on the platform, her son would go to the shop to buy food for the train journey home. But today he was unusually long in coming back.

These were the thoughts going through her mind when a young, dark, pretty woman approached her.

'Greetings, gogo,' said the young woman, her cheeks producing dimples.

'Greetings, my child,' answered the old lady looking carefully at this young pretty woman who was a symbol of a respectable *makoti*.

'When is the train to Durban departing?' asked Sophie, consulting her watch.

'At ten o'clock.'

The conversation was very easy with the loquacious old lady. The cars and people on the platform increased.

'Excuse me, gogo, can you look after my luggage while I go to the shop? I won't be long.'

'Okay, okay, my child,' agreed the old lady pulling the suitcase nearer.

She quickly ascended the steps. By the time she reached the top she was panting. To her surprise and dismay, here was Elias shaking hands with another man. They chatted like old friends who hadn't seen each other for a long time.

Sophie stood there confused. Fortunately Elias's back was turned on her and the place was teeming with people. She quickly recovered and mingled with the crowd. Without looking back she zig-zagged through the crowded arcade.

She was relieved when she alighted from the bus in Kensington. She had nearly come face to face with Elias Malinga. Fortunately he was cheerfully obsessed with meeting his friend. She was scared all the way to the bus terminus, but more so because of the taxi driver. Now something else bothered her. The old lady? Who was she? Sophie felt as if she knew, or had at least seen the woman somewhere. She searched into the past, but couldn't locate it.

What will happen to the suitcase? Will the old lady take it?

And Elias? What was he doing there? She suddenly felt hatred for Elias. He had never pitied her, and it was worse when she phoned his place of employment to be a laughing stock to his friends. She became angry with herself to have allowed her life to be dominated by love that brought no peace or happiness, while Jonas was there giving all the love and kindness he possessed. For the first time she fell in love with Jonas. But would he still accept her? If only he would ask her to marry him. She would not do it for the sake of getting married. She would be marrying a man she truly loved.

Jonas and the Nyasa doctor were seated on the bed when Sophie came in. Sophie was surprised to see all Jonas's belongings packed up.

'Are you leaving me, Jonas?' Sophie whispered in a shaky voice.

'No, darling. My father wants me back in Malawi because he can no longer handle the farm by himself. And I would be very happy to take you along with me.'

'But I don't have a passport. How can I go to Malawi without one? And besides, my parents won't know where I am.'

'We are in fact not going today. We will negotiate with your parents next Saturday,' said Jonas pointing at the doctor who sat quietly on the bed, nodding time and again.

It was a cool sunny Saturday when the doctor took Sophie and Jonas to Jan Smuts airport in his small car. Sophie was going to board a plane for the first time in her life. Jonas had made many trips to see his ailing father who wanted him to take over the farm. For a long time Jonas had ignored his father's pleas for him to take over the running of the farm. But now he had finally relented.

Through the car window Sophie watched the people moving leisurely in and out of shops. The trees lining Bezuidenhout Valley Avenue and the flowers in the Europeans' gardens looked beautiful and peaceful as they fluttered in the cool morning air. It was as if she was seeing this part of Johannesburg for the first time.

They couldn't identify Baba Banda (the doctor) among the crowd that stood attentively on the balcony, as they stared through the plane window.

The flying machine took off and the crowd waved cheerfully. Sophie felt that it was taking her away from the monster that had terrified her a few days ago.

The buildings below became smaller as the aeroplane went higher, until the undersurface turned into a vast blue sky.

She wondered where in one of those houses, was Mamlambo. But could never guess that it had become the property of Elias. Yes, after Elias had chatted to his friend, he went back to his mother.

'Whose case is this, Mama?'

'A young girl's. She asked me to look after it for her until she returned. But I don't know what's happened to her.'

'Well, if she doesn't come back I'll take it.'

To Fly

Steve Jacobs

Above, a Boeing 737 belonging to the South African Airways meandered its plush, indolent way down to the airport across the road. Joel Gweba watched the white bird with the orange tail. It was beautiful; it shone in the sunlight as though it had been polished. Joel looked about him at the people on the dump. No one seemed to have noticed the metal bird. Except for Harold Dube who complained about the bloody noise. These people, Joel thought, these people wouldn't know magic if they fell over it.

'Look,' he said to Sarah. The little girl was scampering across the hill-top like a puppy. She had no shoes, but her feet were tough as leather. She wore a dirty dress, once gaily decorated with flowers, now tattered and skimpy.

'Look?' she asked, pulling up in mid-stride. She gave a despairing glance at the discarded doll she had been after. The caterpillar tractor was already tumbling it down the hillside. Hands on hips, she confronted the earnest boy, angry that she had lost her plaything.

'What must I look at?' she demanded. She saw that there were tears in his eyes. Impatiently, she stomped her foot in the dust and turned to see what the next truck had brought. She had no time for crying, Joel knew.

'Wait,' he said. 'Look up there. Look at the plane.' But the gleaming toy had gone, sunk behind a row of trees.

'Ag nonsense,' exclaimed the girl. 'What's wrong with you? There's lots of planes. They come all the time.' Yet she did not move away.

Joel reached down and pulled a piece of metal from the dirt. It could have come from an electrical appliance, from an old stove or a fridge. He considered it for a while and then offered it to her. She backed off distrustfully.

'That plane . . . ' he pointed ' . . . was just a lot of pieces like this.'

She squinted at him and put her hand to her mouth. Then she shook her head.

'Nay man. That's from a washing-machine or something like that. You telling lies.' And she spat scornfully into the dirt. Joel knew that he was different from the other boys on the dump; he knew that Sarah could not understand differences. She hurried off

before he could restrain her.

Joel threw the metal part away from him and watched it fly, but not fly. It clanged noisily against one of the garbage trucks that littered the hill-top. The driver yelled and waved his fist at the boy.

For ten years, the trucks had brought rubbish and soil to this spot of empty ground outside the city. And for ten years, while tractors shaped the collected garbage into a large plateau, blacks from the townships had made their living from the refuse of the city. The Administration Board pretended not to notice.

Joel wanted to fly. He wanted so badly to fly that his desire was like a monumental, tingling itch somewhere inside his chest. He could not reach to scratch it; it sometimes left him breathless and choking. He swore, in frustrated anger, at the truck driver who helped to keep him on the ground.

Harold Dube looked up from his labours, and laughed hugely at Joel's outburst. Harold was chipping cement off the bricks that he found; a wall of bricks was stacked beside him.

'Hey kid, you tell him to fok off!' Dube shouted, and playfully lobbed a bit of cement in the direction of the lorry. The driver grinned and raised his fingers in a rude gesture. Then he drove his vehicle forward, close to the edge of the plateau, and tipped out its load. Immediately, a horde of children and adolescents converged on the mound, dismembering its neat shape, and retrieved an assortment of torn clothes, cardboard, bits of metal and broken toys. The driver gave a thumbs-up sign, and turned his lorry back towards the exit. Already, the next truck was preparing to dump, and behind it was another, and another, like bullets ready to enter the chamber of a gun.

The noise of the machines rose and receded. The hill shuddered underfoot as the caterpillar tractor ground by on its business of pushing the rubbish over the precipice. A few daring children ran across the face of the tractor's scoop, rescuing bits of what someone else had thrown away, while a fair-sized crowd waited three metres below to receive the falling bounty.

Nasrudin was down there as well, negotiating deals. He had a permit from the Administration Board 'to collect refuse'. The refuse was, in fact, collected for him, cleaned, bundled and stacked by the people of the dump. In a hierarchy of scavengers, the trader was the primal scavenger. His coat was always spotlessly white; the only sully came from reaching into his top pocket to get at the bundle of notes with which he paid his collectors.

Joel walked away from these scavengers. He knew that he was

different even though he looked just like them: he wore broken tackies without laces, a shirt with no buttons, ill-fitting trousers and a plastic sun visor. An outsider would not have distinguished him from them. And yet, he alone wished to fly. Suddenly, Joel wanted to be with his mother. He made his way across the plateau to find her.

On and around the hill-top, hundreds of people played, or worked conscientiously, or milled about with no apparent aim, waiting for something to happen. The old man with the squint sat in his usual corner, hammering nails from a chair leg. His barrow was full of wood. Despite the squint, the old man's aim was unerring. Joel had often watched him work, secretly hoping he would miss the nail and hit his finger. But the old carpenter never missed.

Near to the place where he sat, the shell of a washing-machine stood unattended. It was filled, incongruously, with loaves of bread wrapped in clear plastic and visible through the circular frontal opening. Joel knew not to investigate more closely; he knew that possessive eyes watched over the food, and that the observers were adept with a knife, and callous, even eager enough to use it. He avoided the trap. He also avoided Thombo, when the idiot ambled towards him.

Thombo was roaming the hill-top listlessly, his attitude reflecting the prevailing atmosphere on the dump. No one spoke to the tall man; people were afraid of him. For Thombo was like a radio receiver: he could not generate his own emotion, but he responded to the strong emotions of others. He could be very violent one moment, and weep like a baby the next. People thought that a very strong spirit lived in Thombo the idiot. Once, when the watchman of the dump disarmed a skollie who was taking pot shots at Nasrudin, Thombo fled into the bushes because the trader's fear was the dominant emotion. But as soon as the idiot tuned in to the anger that followed the fear, he was whipped into a fury, and had to be restrained by five men from throwing himself onto Nasrudin's assailant.

Joel remembered these things as he approached the group of women with whom his mother sat. The women huddled around a fire close to the place where the trucks drove onto the plateau. A heavy plastic bag half-filled with sheep's trotters lay open beside them. The women dipped into the bag at random; they were cooking the woolly stumps on a grid that straddled the small fire.

'Where did you get that?' Joel asked, pointing at the plastic bag.

'It was a present from the butcher,' said Maria Gweba.

One of the women nudged Maria with her elbow. 'He fancies you,' she said.

Maria reached into the bag and scowled at her son for introducing this topic of conversation. 'Ag nee,' she protested. She took out a trotter and put it firmly on the grid. Someone giggled, but Maria looked up to see who it was, and the giggling stopped. 'What's wrong?' she asked Joel.

'I was watching the man-bird,' he said, using a word he had made up. Some of the women in the circle looked at him curiously. Maria shrugged: Joel often said strange things. The women continued, silently, with their work. 'Now I'm hungry,' said the boy.

The charred results of the braai lay in rows on a blanket. Joel took a blackened stick and gnawed the meat, spitting out the fluff. He scuffed his tackies into the dirt as he ate. It was afternoon, sultry, and flies climbed over everything. An occasional police van drove past on the road that flanked the dump; a police station was not far away. Sometimes, a policeman stopped to talk to the watchman who had his headquarters in the narrow hut at the entrance to the dump. On the hill-top, crowds of people waited, waited for something to happen.

The watchman did not prevent the journalists from entering. Armed with a knobkierie, and wearing a greatcoat even in the sweltering heat, he stood at his post and watched the yellow Volkswagen Beetle drive past him onto the plateau. The car stopped near to the place where the women sat. Two men got out: a short dark one holding a notebook, and a taller one with a camera. They walked slowly towards the women, speaking nonchalantly to each other as they walked. The old man with the squint stopped hammering, Harold Dube stopped chipping cement, the coven of women looked up from its cooking and Thombo rolled his eyes in his head while a white fleck of spittle dropped from the corner of his mouth. The pulses of the waiting ones quickened; Thombo shivered with their excitement.

'What do they want?' someone asked.

'They're coming to make trouble,' said Maria, and rearranged the scarf on her head. Joel went to sit behind his mother. He held the gnawed trotter like a club.

'Hello,' said the writer.

No one answered. A tongue clicked.

'I'm writing a story on the dump for my newspaper,' the man continued. 'I'd like to ask you some questions.'

'Leave us alone,' a woman warned.

'We're only interested in money,' said Maria, and everyone laughed. The man smiled and wrote in his notebook. When the one with the camera took photographs, the women hid their faces. Questions were dangerous. Photographs were dangerous.

'Give me two rand,' Maria said sarcastically as the journalists walked away, and again the women laughed.

The men wandered about the hill-top, questioning, taking pictures, writing. Joel followed. The photographer said something to his companion, and then walked to the edge of the plateau. Holding his camera in both hands, he scrambled down to the bottom of the hill. Harold Dube sidled up to the writer and asked him for a cigarette, but the man did not smoke and Harold shuffled away. The writer stood alone for a moment, seeming uncertain what to do next. Joel approached him.

The man looked down at the boy who stared so intently into his eyes. 'What's your name?' Joel demanded.

'Raymond Mullins,' said the journalist. 'What's yours?'

'Joel Gweba.'

'What do you think of all this, Joel?' Mullins asked, indicating the trucks, the women, the young men who waited.

'I want to fly,' said Joel.

'Fly?'

Joel pointed. A plane was rising, sleek and polished, above the tree-tops. 'Help me to fly,' implored the boy.

The man shrugged, uncomfortable. 'I'm just a writer,' he said. 'I can tell your story. That's all.'

A spasm of anger contorted Joel's face. Mullins recoiled from the boy's emotion as though he had been struck. Simultaneously, they heard a cry, a startled, painful sound from the depths below the hill-top. A man stood at the edge of the precipice: a limp, tall, barefooted man, staring stupidly at something below, dangling his long, loose hands like a discharged slingshot.

'Louis!' Mullins shouted, and ran to the place where the tall man stood. 'Louis!'

The watchman with the stick walked by impassively, as though he had not heard or seen a thing. Joel sat down in the dirt, his anger spent, knowing he had caused something terrible to happen, but not knowing what it was. Thombo looked around wildly at the approaching journalist and fled, running madly, leaping and falling and shouting spittle-flecked nothings across the hill-top.

'Louis,' said Mullins uselessly, as he looked down the slope at

the body of his companion.

Sarah walked quickly up to Joel. Her eyes were wide with shock. 'Thombo threw a rock on his head,' she said.

'There must be no police,' Maria Gweba told the group of women around the small cooking fire. 'No police.'

The women agreed.

The message flashed across the dump with the speed of a telegraph system.

A cordon of people escorted Mullins down the embankment, out of sight, while the watchman temporarily kept the trucks at bay. Then the old squint man who hammered nails from chair legs came forward quietly, almost humbly. He was a craftsman, not a showman. He held a knife. Already, the Volkswagen was being stripped, expertly, and the pieces were being removed.

The refuse dump was uniquely equipped with the apparatus for making things, and people, disappear.

Joel sat in the dust of the plateau and looked at the Boeing that was just dissolving into a blue infinity. He did not try to hold back the tears that stained his grimy face.

Go Away, We're Asleep

J. Makunga

It was 8.30 p.m. on a hot summer evening at Park Station, Johannesburg. Ominous clouds had begun to gather over the derricks straddling the serrated mine dumps that had mushroomed over the Rand in search of gold.

Vuyo stood on Platform 18, ostensibly waiting for the Dube train, wondering where on earth he was going to spend the night. For about a year he had been telling Tandie that he and Mavie were going to pull this job and how they were going to be in the moolah. She would not have to slave, working for peanuts, not any longer, oh no, not after they pulled this job, and the next, and the next.

Tandie had kicked him out of her White City, Jabavu shack of corrugated iron — a shack too cold in winter, too hot in summer. They had had to move the bedless mattress on flattened-out cardboard boxes several times, as the numerously patched roof sprung leaks when it rained. The incessantly dripping water quickly filled the old-fashioned chamber pot which had to be emptied continuously through the plank window Vuyo had nailed together to alleviate the airlessness and stifling heat in the shack. Keeping it company were other bedraggled pondokkies, some made of flattened-out paraffin tins, others of old plywood and boards. For the most part they were sack-built by those luckless enough not to have found anything better to build with so that the place was called Masakeng — an eyesore besmirching the grassless, rocky Highveld comprising the richest earth in the world.

The night before, exhausted from skondai, Tandie more so from working for whiteman boss than from Vuyo's seemingly tireless and inexorable ups-and-downs, thisways-and-thatways, ins-and-outs, they lay panting listening to the gurgling and gargling of the vlei that streamed nearby with its cargo of garbage, faeces, urine and what-have-you.

'I can't take this shit any longer!' Tandie blurted out suddenly.

'What?' Vuyo asked, knowing very well what she meant.

'You're forever talking about this job that never materialises, how we're going to get married, how we're going to live in one of those posh houses in Dube, how — ag, forget it! ...If you don't get your ass to the pass-office and register for a job, don't come back here tomorrow night,' she said.

Vuyo thought: What! stand in an endless queue all day long, be

emasculated by being tribalised in a pass-book: Name and present address? Place and date of birth? Name of chief? Name and address of last/present employer? Wages? Fingerprints? Income tax? Native tax? Hut tax? ... be told to come the next day at 6 a.m. from one day to another, then, after fourteen days, be given a police escort to go to God-knows-where in some uninhabitable, demoralising, backward, so-called bantu homeland? ... Aloud he said: 'What the fuck's wrong with you girl? I'm not going to work my ass off for two rand a week in some Jeppe sweatshop just to get by! Actually, I am not going to shit, shave or bath till I get me some bread!'

'If you don't go to the zangan office, you're not sleeping here another night!'

Vuyo decided to change his tactics.

'Come on baby,' he said, fondling Tandie's ample breasts with one hand while trying to caress her pubic hair with the other. Tandie was as frigid and indifferent as the spruit outside, listless and lifeless with its trash.

Vuyo fingered the change in his dungarees. 'Six lousy pennies!' On an impulse, he bounded up the stairs three at a time to the 'msechi' — barrier attendant. 'Huit,' he greeted Nzo, who did not even ask for Vuyo's train ticket. He knew that Vuyo didn't have one and rode the trains from Randfontein to Springs 'staff' with disgusting effrontery.

Vuyo had suddenly thought about Tsidi who worked in Parktown North where all the millionaires lived. He could have kicked himself for not having thought about her sooner. With Tsidi he could live like a king, sleep like a lord, eating and drinking what she served her masters. Imagine spending one night in Meadowlands, another in Pimville, another in Kliptown, another in — goddamn! I am becoming a regular hobo, he thought.

He swung onto the For Natives Only trolley bus at the corner of Fraser and Diagonal Streets just as the bus was leaving, paid his five cents and headed for Parktown North. He hummed inaudibly as the bus passed the Johannesburg Zoo. He gazed wistfully at the huge mansions, with oversized yards and carefully manicured lawns. It was like being transported from a derelict, barren Masakeng into a garden of Eden. The contrast between Shantytown and Parktown turned his stomach.

Approaching Tsidi's working place, he nimbly swung off the bus with an agility he was accustomed to, taking the momentum of the

bus on his dirty tennis shoes. Soundlessly walking in the shadows, he crept towards Tsidi's 'dog's-meat' home, so-called because when the maddie went shopping, part of the meat she bought was allotted the servant. 'These fucking dogs live and eat better than we do,' Vuyo thought.

Stealthily he went to the backyard where the servants' quarters was located, hoping that the bloody dog would not bark. The massive mansion in front was built rococo-style, of rough-hewn granite bricks with creepers climbing up to the cupola-like roof. Vuyo thought this was a lot of money spent in bad taste. Facing the street was a white-railed veranda with deck-chairs where the masters had their sundowners. Surrounding the house was a hedge of well-trimmed rhododendrons.

The servants' quarters comprised a block of three brick rooms — one for the maid, one for the cook, the third for the gardener. Adjoining the maid's room was a lavatory next to a coal-shed. Vuyo thought the set-up looked sumptuous compared to Tandie's hovel and its raggedy companions.

He tapped lightly on Tsidi's door. No answer. He tapped again, a little louder.

'Who is it?' Tsidi asked.

'Vuyo,' he answered, thinking that living in Johannesburg was a pain in the ass because one was always suspicious of knocks at night: if they were loud and peremptory, it was the police or the boss; if they were soft and timid, it was a hustler or a poor relative.

After what appeared to be a long pause, Vuyo was about to knock again when a baritone voice growled: 'Go away, we're asleep.'

Vuyo sucked in his breath sharply and cursed softly. He was thinking fast: The shit's up the creek for me. There's nowhere nearby where I can spend the night. I'm bound to be picked up by the prowling 'flying squad' if I leave here. My pass-book isn't in order and I'll be arrested for not having worked for the past year or so. The last bus into the city has already left ... I don't have bus fare anyway. It's past 9 p.m. and the curfew for blacks in the city is on ... goddamn!

He tiptoed into the lavatory. It was too small, and spending the night on the commode was very uncomfortable, as he discovered after he had tried it for a while. He then explored the coal-shed. It was as black as some of the pondokkies he had seen in Masakeng. Lying next to some bags of anthracite were some empty sacks. He spread two on the floor as if he was making up a

sick-bed in a hospital. He sat on them, knees hunched, arms folded, chin on chest, craving a cigarette, staring at the blackened wall, thinking about Tandie's warm tender body, calling Tsidi a regular rubber-neck — bitch. It was hard for him to believe that he was in Parktown spending the night on sacks as if he was in Shantytown. 'Hit the sack, Jack,' he said to himself, resignedly, and tried to sleep.

After about an hour he heard a key turn, a door open, the toilet door close. He quickly slipped out of the coal-shed, stepped lightly into Tsidi's dark room, and locked the door behind him. Taking out his gonie he relaxed; he even grinned wryly when he discovered in the dimness of the room that it was Tsidi who lay in bed. He could just discern a man's pair of pants, jacket and shirt on a chair; the man's shoes were under it. He climbed fully clothed, with his sneakers on, into the bed without disturbing her.

'That was quick,' mumbled Tsidi. She sounded very sleepy and pooped from screwing, Vuyo thought.

'Mm,' Vuyo responded indistinctly, anonymously. A few minutes later the doorknob turned. Then:

'What the hell! Tsidi, open the fucken door!'

Vuyo had the blade of his gonie on Tsidi's neck as he hissed:

'One squeak out of you and you're a dead duck!' Loudly, he said in a baritone voice:

'Go away, we're asleep.'

The Spirit of Two Worlds

Jayapraga Reddy

The old woman pounded the spices in a wooden mortar. She sat on a grass mat in the sartorial position adopted by generations of women before her. It was cool under the mango tree and the gentle susurration of the breeze among the leaves was like the voice of God murmuring His comfort. Out here it was quiet and she could think her thoughts in peace as she prepared the mangoes for pickling. But today her thoughts were not very pleasant. They were troubled and she was forced to acknowledge the disturbing fact that there was rebellion in her household. Ever since Veeran, her youngest son, had married, there was dissension in her home. He hadn't heeded her advice and had obstinately followed his own desires. So now he reaped the consequences. A shadow hung over her normally peaceful household. Nothing pleased her new daughter-in-law. Nothing was good enough for her. She complained that the semi-detached house in the Indian township was too cramped and that there was not much diversion in the district. Her discontent and aloofness did not invite intimacy and she remained isolated. She kept to herself, joining the family only when necessary. The other daughters-in-law were tolerant at first but now there was open resentment. It was time, they maintained, that she took an interest in the family and did her share of the housework. She couldn't deny the truth of it. Sharda was headstrong and wilful. By bringing in her own ideas and an alien lifestyle, she had upset the smooth running of her home. In her day, oh her day, none of this would have been permitted, she lamented inwardly.

Radha, her eldest daughter-in-law, came out to her. 'You like some tea, Ma?' she asked, speaking in Tamil.

The old woman nodded and as she watched her go back in again, she thought how good and obedient a daughter-in-law she had been. She always wore a sari and her hair was still long and worn in a simple plait. No task was too much for her. Not when it came to doing things for her.

Radha returned with an enamel mug full of tea, which frothed like beer. Just the way she liked it, she thought, sipping it slowly. The hot fragrant brew dispelled some of her depression. She wished Radha would go away and leave her to her thoughts. But Radha lingered.

'There is trouble,' Radha informed her. 'Now she wants to go to work. He said she cannot go to work. She was very angry.'

The old woman sighed but refrained from comment.

She did not ask how she came by such knowledge. In the rather cramped living conditions of the council house, nothing was very private. Quarrels became public and one's tears, unless shed quietly, were heard by all. Radha went on, giving her all the details, but the old woman stopped her with a quelling gesture. She rose and went indoors.

Veeran stood at the window looking out vacantly. Sundays were usually so peaceful, the old woman thought as she studied him. Sundays were meant for outings attending weddings and functions and for visits to relatives. Now Sundays were torn by strife and tension.

'What is wrong, my son?' she asked softly. He did not turn around. She sensed his humiliation and hurt.

'She wants to work,' he said reluctantly.

'Then let her work, my son,' she said.

He turned and regarded her with disbelief. 'You want her to work!' he exclaimed.

She shook her head sadly. 'No, I don't want her to work. But if that is what she wants and if it will make her happy, then let her work.'

He turned away, his jaw setting in a grim, obstinate line. 'She doesn't have to work,' he pointed out.

'All women are not the same,' she reminded him.

'She says she is dying of boredom.'

Boredom. She left him then and went back to sit under the tree where she reflected upon this new and alien plague which afflicted the young. Her mind went back over the years searching for something which remotely resembled this malady, but there was nothing. There were hardships, countless sacrifices which had been made willingly, much pain and heart-break and some rare and memorable moments of joy and happiness, but never boredom. She had married at thirteen, a child bride in an arranged marriage. In those days one did not question these things, one merely complied with one's parents' wishes and submitted silently to whatever was arranged. She had had nine children, six of whom had survived. An early marriage was followed by early widowhood and at forty she found herself alone at the helm. She hired a stall in the Indian market and so managed to keep her family together. Her struggle eased a little when her children were educated and

settled in comfortable jobs. Soon she was able to give up the stall and retire, and so came to a quiet port. But there were so many lessons in one's life which one could not pass on to the young.

Sharda went to work as a hairdresser in an elegant new salon in Durban. The old woman wondered whether her new-found financial independence brought her any happiness. She bought a whole lot of new clothes, all modern and fashionable. Her short hair was styled often and in different ways. There were murmurs of jealousy and resentment among the other daughters-in-law. Even Radha fell prey to this.

'What does she work for? Only for her clothes and perfumes! While we stay at home and work like slaves she lives like a queen!' Radha observed acidly.

But that was only the beginning. Having got her way once, Sharda demanded other things. Her heart heavy with grief, the old woman looked on while Veeran weakly surrendered to her whims. Sharda learnt to drive and demanded a car of her own. Bus journeys were long and tedious, she maintained. With a car of her own she could get home earlier and have more time. More time for what? the old woman wondered. He was as malleable as clay in her hands. It was not right. No woman ought to have that much power over any man.

The car was small and sleek. The day she brought it home, the other daughters-in-law stood at their windows and watched her furtively. She drove with an enviable ease, and they could sense her irrepressible excitement as she sprang out of her car. But her pleasure was short-lived.

At supper that night the family sat around the table in a grim silence, united in their resentment and disapproval.

For once, Sharda was not immune to their feelings. At first she ate in quiet defiance. Then a small knot of anger began to form at the pit of her stomach. It was unfair! What had she done that was wrong? Was it her fault that she could not fit in with their narrow conformity? Surely not! She rose abruptly and left the room. The silence around the table intensified. The old woman watched her go with a heavy heart.

In the weeks that followed the old woman tried to hold her disintegrating family together. But the task was too much for her. She was discovering that her matriarchal authority had its limits and had to give way to a way of life that was rapidly becoming the norm.

The things her generation had cherished and valued were being

replaced by an alien culture which sacrificed love and caring on the altar of Mammon and whose devotees foolishly pursued the things of the flesh.

The old woman took her troubles to her gods in prayer. But there were no answers. Her heart heavy with grief, she saw the rift between her and Sharda widen and was powerless to halt the inevitable. And the inevitable came one afternoon when Veeran announced that he was moving out on his own. The old woman received the news in a cold silence. Her initial reaction was one of grief. Then she felt anger. Anger because he was allowing it to happen. He didn't want it to happen but he was giving in to her once too often. She studied him for a long moment, undeceived by his outward composure. He did not meet her eyes directly for he feared the betrayal of his true emotions.

'Are you sure you want to do this, my son?' she asked quietly. It took him a long while to answer, and when he did it was with an effort.

'It is for the best.'

Surely he did not believe that! She rose and left the room and he did not see the naked pain in her eyes.

She sat in her room for a long while, her hands resting in her lap, numb with pain. He was the youngest son and best loved. Perhaps that had been a mistake. Sons were not yours to hold. They were arrows to be released into the world.

The old woman read the surprise in her daughter-in-law's eyes. For the first time they were confronting each other directly. For a long moment their glances met and held. It was the young woman who looked away first. The old woman recalled the day Veeran told her of his wedding plans. He had met her at a party, he said. She was pretty and so full of fun. She hadn't objected to the choice but had merely advised him to wait. But he hadn't waited. Alas, the young wanted everything quickly and easily.

'So you are breaking up my home,' the old woman commented. The younger woman's glance wavered. Then she straightened and her glance steadied.

'No, that's not true. All I want is to live on my own. Is that wrong?'

Sharda looked up and met the old woman's eyes. There was none of the old defiance or antagonism. But in the wordless silence, the old woman read a quiet plea for understanding. The old woman studied her for a long while. There was strength in

silence. She would not give her the satisfaction of having the last word.

'You came to this house in peace, so leave in peace. You are leaving this house of your own free will. All I ask is that you look after my son. You have my blessing and I hope you will be happy. If this is your wish, then let it be. But know this, you too will have children. And you too will need them in your old age. I hope when you do, that they will be there.'

Sharp words sprang to the young woman's mind then. She wanted to remind the old woman that her son's duty was now to his wife. That times had changed. That she had tried to fit in with her family but had failed. But something in her mother's teaching came to mind. She looked away. The old woman's words touched a chord in her mind, and dimly, she recalled something about respect for the elderly and submission to one's husband. Did these things really matter in these times? Perhaps they did. Who was she to question them? Her world, her generation had all the questions but no answers.

Sharda moved into a flat in Durban. Occasionally they came to visit the family. With time the old woman came to accept the change. Some of the hurt was gone. But although she treated Sharda with the fairest consideration, she could not easily forgive her. Pride would not allow her to acknowledge defeat. There were some things she would not give in to. Like visiting Sharda.

On special occasions Sharda would try to get her to visit her, but the old woman always declined. When pressed for reasons, she maintained a tight-lipped silence. She was determined that nothing would make her yield to that.

On one occasion Sharda left in tears, chagrined by the old woman's obstinacy. The old woman watched her go and savoured the lone power of triumph. Let that be a lesson to them, she thought. She was not putty in their hands, to be moulded according to their will. Age did not mean easy capitulation to the whims of the young. She would not bend to their will. The winds of change were blowing down all the old pillars, but there were some things to which she would not easily give in.

There were times, though, when the thought came to her unbidden, that perhaps she ought to bow to change gracefully, while time and strength were on her side. But she harboured the thought fleetingly. The old unyielding core of obstinacy would come to the fore, and she would be strengthened in her resolve to remain adamant.

One morning Veeran came to see her. She wondered why he should call so early. She sensed his excitement and knew it meant good news.

'Ma, Sharda has a son,' he announced. 'You must come and see him.'

She received the news with mixed feelings. Her grandson. A new life, a new beginning. This was a time for rejoicing, for thanksgiving. For a long moment she struggled with herself, longing for the release of surrender. Her spirit was tired and she was strongly tempted to call a truce. Wordlessly, she followed Veeran to the car.

Later, as she held the child in her arms, she recalled another birth in the distant past, when she cradled her last born who had looked so very much like this child. She looked at Veeran and smiled.

'He's a beautiful child and he looks just like you did,' she said.

'Sharda will have to give up work now,' he pointed out. The old woman turned to Sharda. When their eyes met there was a new gentleness, a new peace in the old woman's eyes.

'No, she doesn't have to. I will look after the child,' she said serenely. She put the child down and rose. The spirit of two worlds had merged in a new beginning.

Photography



STAFFRIDER AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Joyce Ozynski

From the very first issue of *Staffrider*, photography was included as a regular section alongside fiction, poetry and art. By providing this platform for documentary photography, *Staffrider* legitimised photography as an art form, and recognised it as being equal in expressive significance to prose, poetry and art.

The pages devoted to photography exposed the work of photographers to a wider audience than they could reach by any other means, and helped to popularise and demystify the photographic image. The concept of what a photograph could say was extended beyond the family snapshot, the newspaper or advertising image.

The positive role played by *Staffrider* was particularly important because in the seventies the practice of documentary photography was precarious and fragmentary. Documentary photography was struggling to establish itself in a culture that gave no encouragement to the making of such images. And for each individual photographer, there was the struggle to overcome the blind spots resulting from an internalised apartheid ideology. To see what had not hitherto been seen; to make visible what had been invisible; to find ways of articulating, through the medium of photography, a reality obscured by government propaganda and the mass media – this was the challenge to photographers.

Each image that appeared in *Staffrider* was a victory over these obstacles. Despite these difficulties, the documentary photographer was in a stronger position than the artist. There was a well-established tradition of documentary photography which he/she could draw on (this was mostly American), and locally there were a few pioneering photographers whose work in earlier years had paved the way. These precedents had clearly established the validity of social comment through photography. But, for the artists whose work appeared in *Staffrider*, there was the dilemma of trying to meet the demands of a formalist aesthetic while giving expression to a consciousness of social issues. While artists battled to resolve this problem, photography was able to move ahead, exploring and documenting injustices in society in a straightforward but telling way.

In 1983, a *Staffrider* special issue devoted entirely to photography was published. At the same time the first *Staffrider* exhibition of photography was held. (This large group exhibition became a regular annual event.) These two events

reflected the gathering momentum of the social documentary movement.

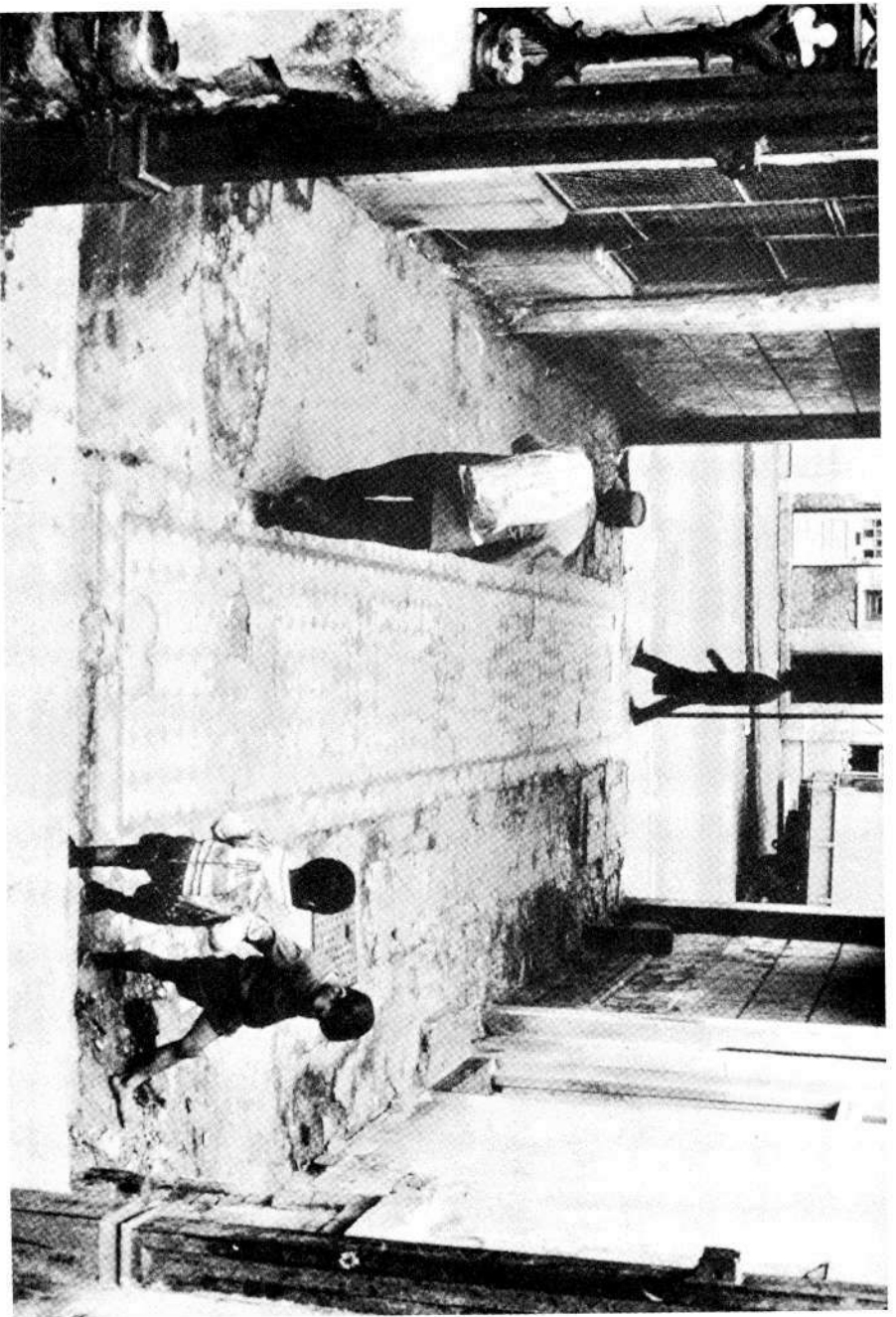
Staffrider's support for photography over the past ten years undoubtedly contributed to the growth of the social documentary movement – photographers whose work appeared in the earliest issues are still very active, and new photographers are appearing all the time to swell the ranks. In recent years, the movement has also gathered strength on an organisational level. Organisations such as Afrapix, The Centre for Documentary Photography and the Market Photo Gallery have facilitated the work of photographers. The recent formation of The Photo Workshop testifies to the continuing vitality of the movement.



Jimi Matthews *Twenty thousand gone*



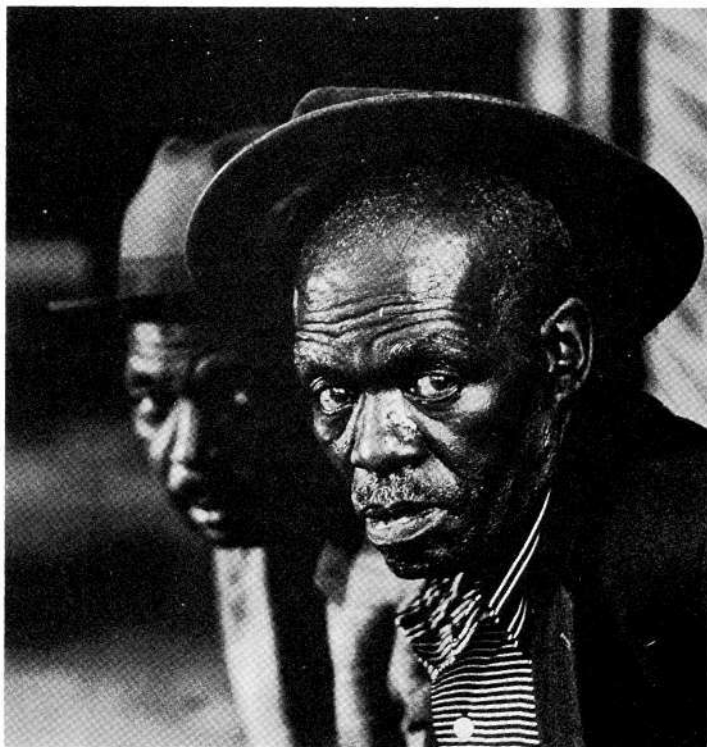
Mark Lavender



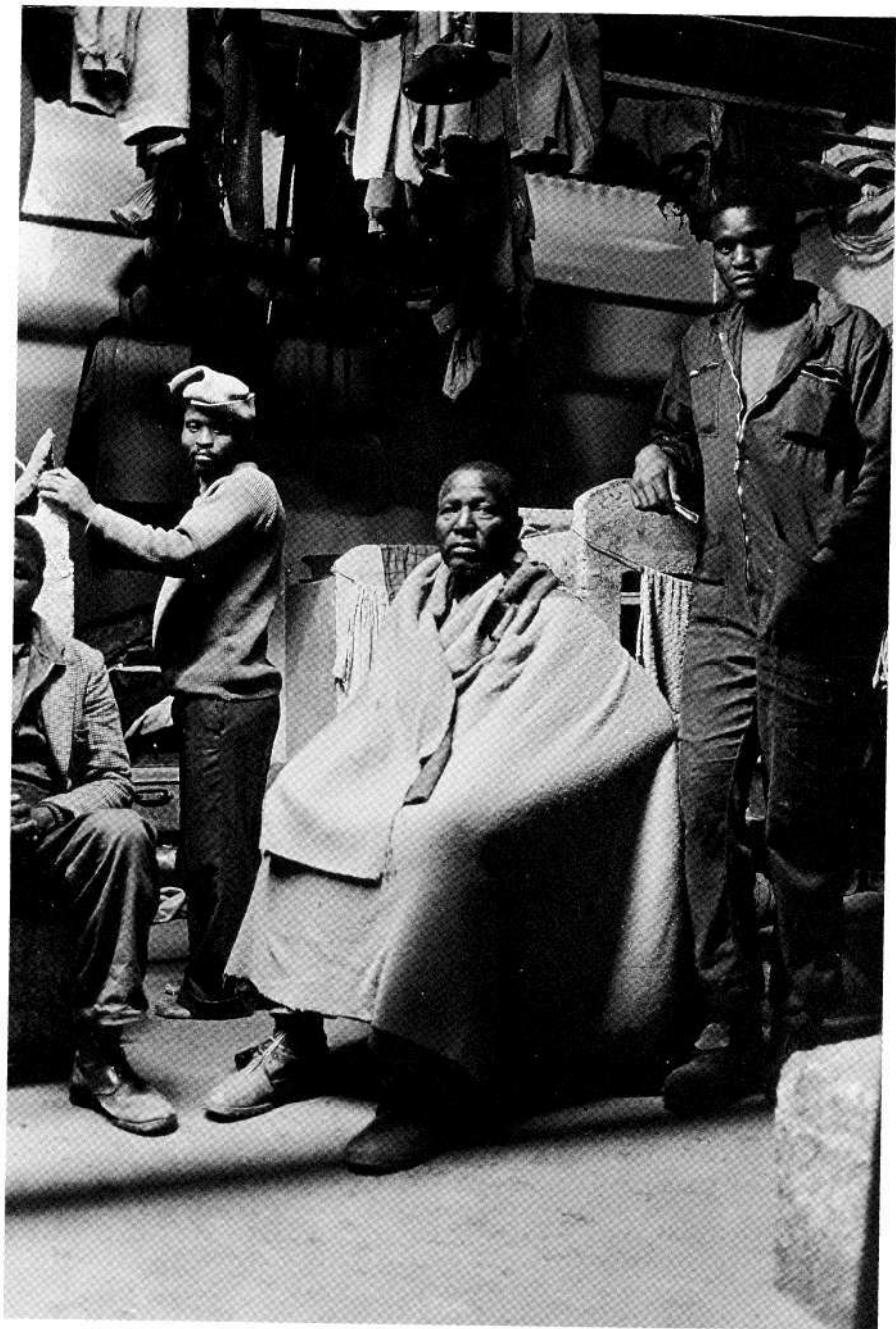
George Hallett



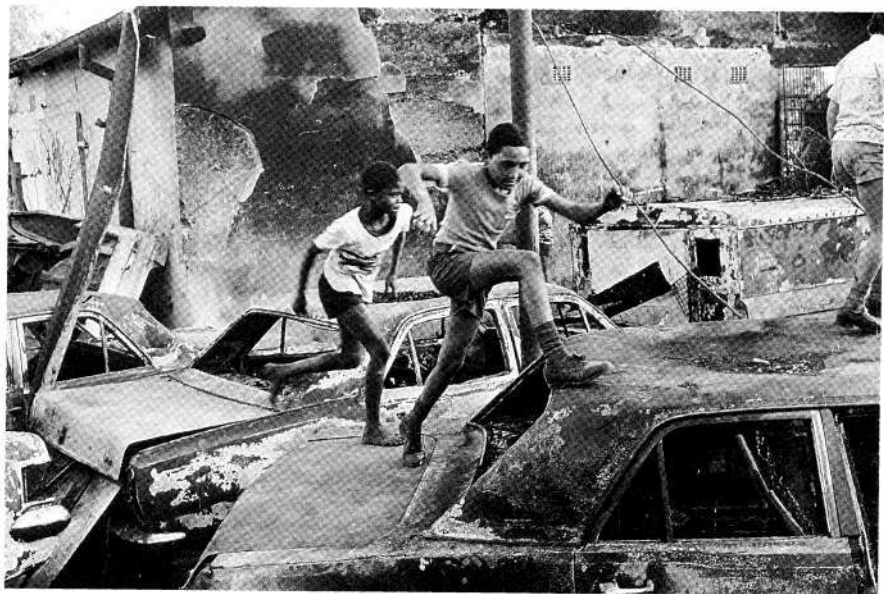
Judas Ngwenya *Mayfair, Johannesburg Municipal workers take a break*



Ralph Ndawo



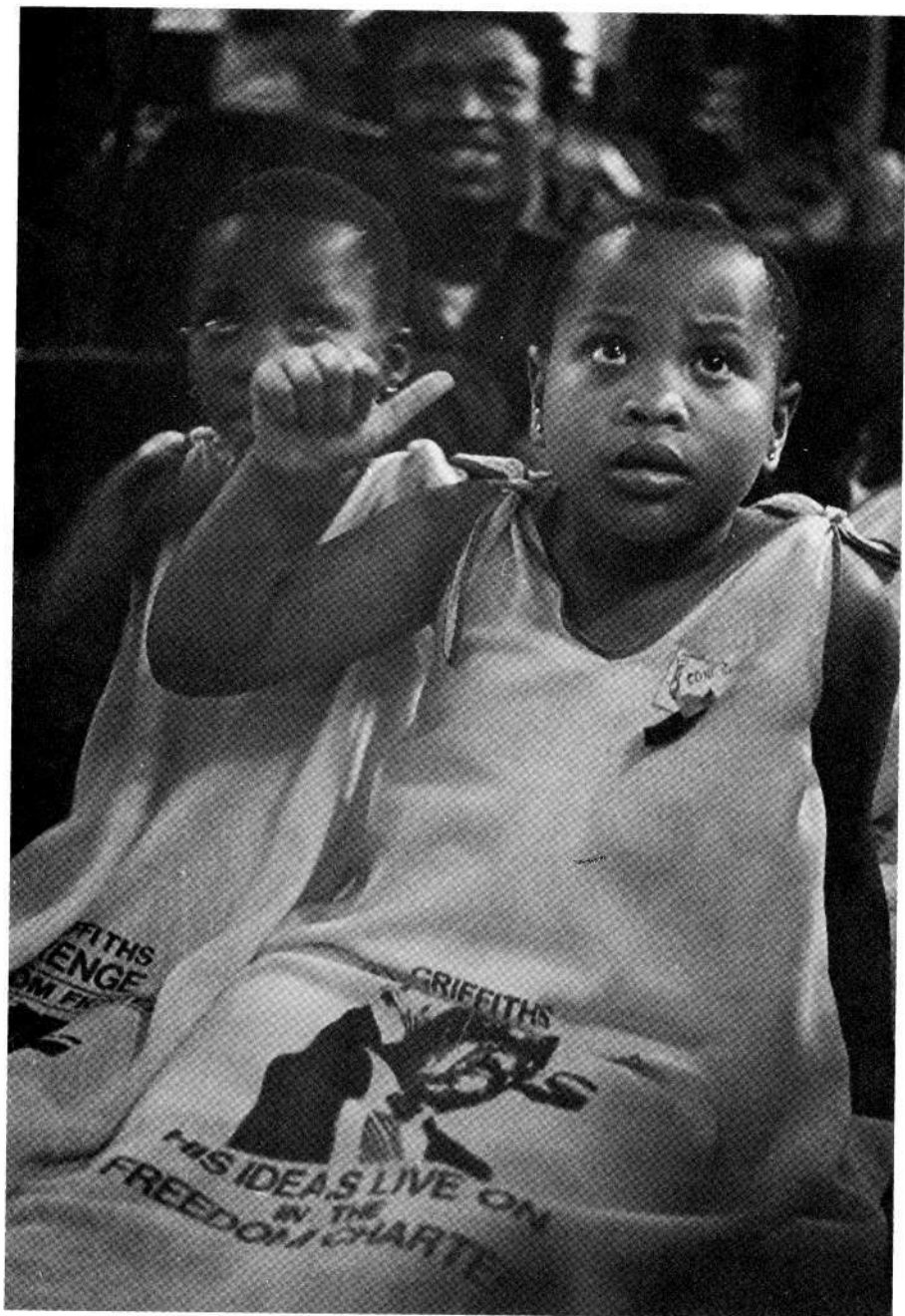
Lesley Lawson *Hostel scene*



Biddy Partridge *Reiger Park*



Biddy Partridge *Sports day*



Jeeva Rajgopaul

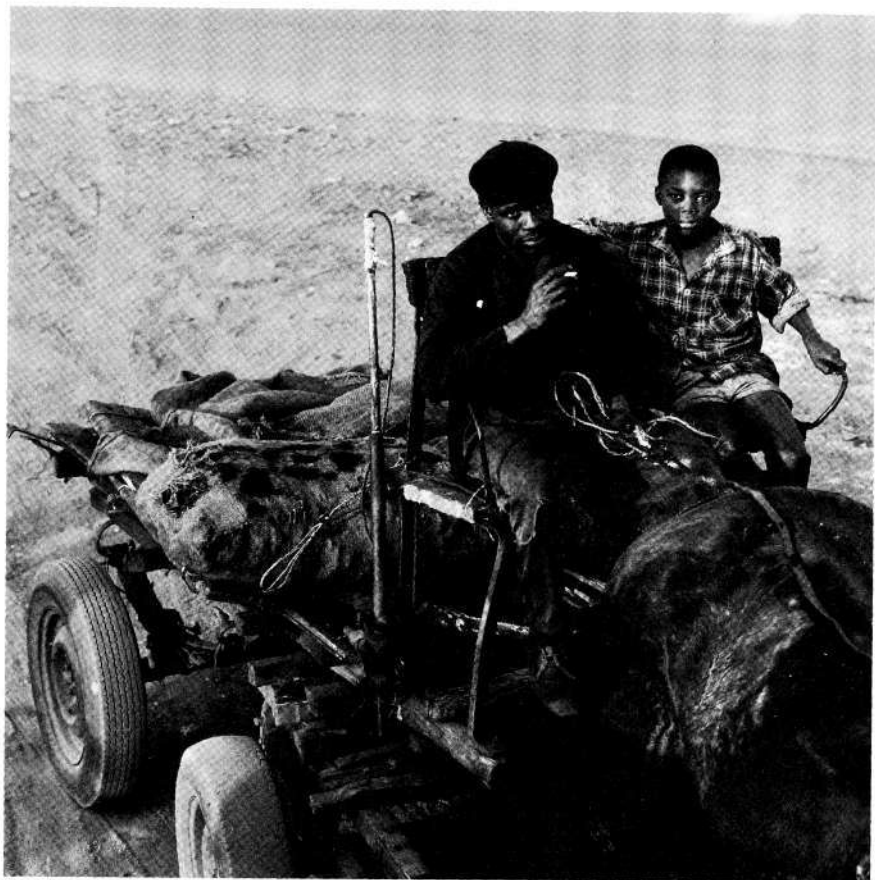


Karl Sansom *District Six*

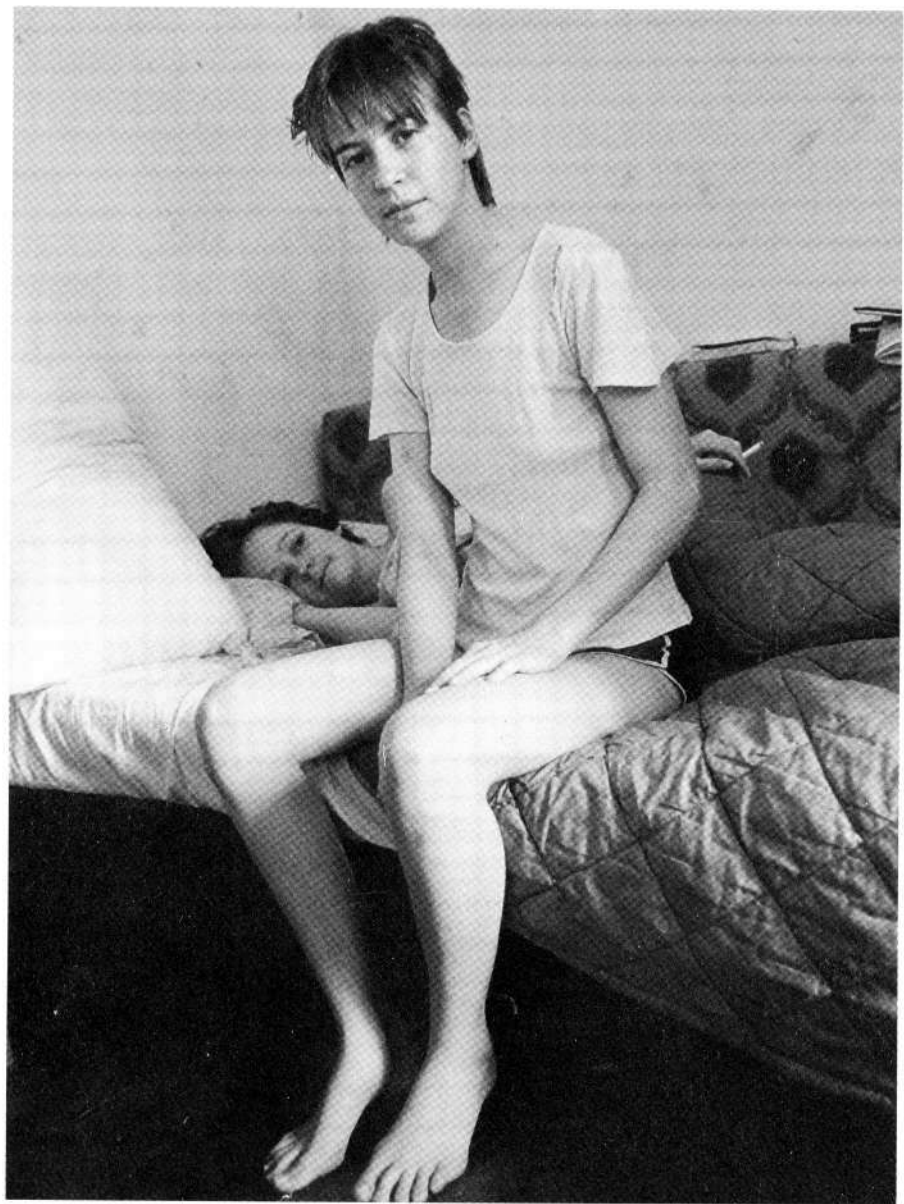


Omar Badsha

Migrant worker and his wife



David Goldblatt *Soweto: Coalminer and son*



Wendy Schwegmann *Hillbrow*



Paul Weinberg *Students on the march at the funeral of Bongani Khumalo*



Guy Tillim *Qwa-Qwa: Fetching water from a communal tap*



Cedric Nunn *Inyoni, Zululand: Woman in a field*



Santo Mofokeng



CHRISTOPHER VAN WYK
Staffrider and the Politics of Culture

Christopher van Wyk is a former editor of Staffrider and a poet who was first published in 1979. In this interview with Andries Walter Oliphant he speaks about his involvement with the magazine and some of the problems facing South African writing today.

STAFFRIDER: You have been involved as an editor of two related, but also different literary magazines, namely *Wietie* and *Staffrider*. Could you briefly sketch how this came about?

VAN WYK: Yes. As you know *Staffrider* was established in 1978 and *Wietie* came into existence two years later, in 1980. Fhazel Johennesse, a co-editor of *Wietie*, and I were interested in the work done by *Staffrider* but we were unhappy about the editorial approach in the magazine. The relatively uncritical approach which characterised the editing led us to search for an alterna-

tive. I would like to make it clear that we were not ideologically opposed to *Staffrider* since the Black Consciousness approach was also part of *Wietie*. This was the dominant ideological perspective of the time and we, like almost all cultural activists, subscribed to the self-reliance advocated by this perspective.

It was primarily the loose editorial policy which we were opposed to. It was referred to as a system of self-editing and involved contributors editing their own work. This led to a situation where some work, especially poetry, was published although it did not merit publication. We felt that the problem should be addressed and this led to the establishment of *Wietie* which was based on a far more selective editorial policy.

STAFFRIDER: Given your position then, and the subsequent demise of *Wietie*, when did you become involved in *Staffrider* and how did your original attitude affect your editorship?

VAN WYK: I became involved in *Staffrider* by chance. I went to see Mike Kirkwood at Ravan Press about some other matter. We ended up discussing South African literature and Kirkwood, who was aware of my attitude and views, invited me to participate in the editing of *Staffrider*. Well, I thought, this is a magazine to which I am opposed, not ideologically of course, but as I have said, to the form of its editorial management. When Kirkwood indicated that my reservations might have some validity I felt that I could perhaps contribute to giving the magazine a new direction. You see, despite my reservations I have always felt that *Staffrider* was and still is a very exciting and vibrant magazine.

I ended up editing the magazine for approximately six years. During that time I found that the historical circumstances demanded a change to the then prevailing perspective of the magazine. By the early eighties Black Consciousness was beginning to wane and with the formation of the United Democratic Front new political and cultural perspectives began to emerge. A non-racial attitude was beginning to take shape in the country. At that stage the magazine published an overwhelming number of black contributors and I felt that the non-racial perspective required a greater openness to all South African writers.

Another change which I made to the magazine involved the editorial method. The assumption that some potential contributors made that their work would automatically be published was evident in the fact that contributions would often arrive without addresses. By that time the self-editing method, against which I had strong reservations, had gone out of practice. This was due to the gradual collapse of the various writers' groups around the country. These groups died but individual contributors continued sending in their work with the assumption that it would be published. I contacted some of the writers and informed them that their work was not suitable for publication, suggested some

revisions and expressed a willingness to assist where necessary. I also insisted that a system of literary merit be adopted. All this occurred against the background of the early *Staffrider* and the white-controlled magazines such as *New Coin* and *Contrast*, to which a small group of black writers sent their work. Although some of the white editors had good intentions and progressive views, black people, especially during the height of Black Consciousness, felt that blacks should do things by themselves and for themselves. Blacks argued that they knew what standards they would like to impose on their culture. This, then, led to the establishment of *Staffrider* with its self-editing policy which was lauded by some and criticised by others.

An even greater problem emerged later: I recall the idea being suggested that a critical analysis of the works generated during the Black Consciousness period would reveal that they were essentially products created by the victims of oppression. These works dwelt so persistently on the manifestations of oppression that they ironically exacerbated oppression instead of assisting with its eradication. This too had to be avoided and, as can be expected, it presented far greater difficulties than merely changing the editorial style of the magazine. It required critical intervention and long-term strategies which would replace the reactive protest writing with a more profound imaginative engagement with the South African reality.

STAFFRIDER: To return to the question of Black Consciousness and the early *Staffrider*. There has been, and from your own articulations, there still seems to be a widespread conception that the early *Staffrider* was essentially a Black Consciousness publication. However, going over the magazine recently I became aware of a number of things which unsettled this conception. Firstly, *Staffrider* came into existence two years after the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and the first two volumes published a diversity of contributors. Secondly, the dissolution of PEN took place in 1979, that is, a year after the establishment of *Staffrider*. The dissolution of PEN was largely attributable to the pressures which came to bear on black writers after the brutal repressions which followed the uprising of June 16. Thirdly, the non-racial movement and its alignment to Congress politics emerged in 1983. An overview of the magazine shows that it was at no stage exclusively black in either its contributions or its readership. What do you think of this?

VAN WYK: Well, although I was not editor of the magazine during the first four years of its existence, some of its readers have tended to see it as a black magazine because most of its contributors were and still are black. There were of course people who were opposed to the ideology of Black Consciousness, even at that time there were adherents of the non-racial movement and they were not necessarily white. These people contributed to the magazine with the understanding that it represented the vanguard of South African radical writing. The conception of its ideological alignment tended to categorise it

as Black Consciousness. Whether this was due more to the prevailing ideology of the seventies than to the dominant perspective in the magazine is of course open to question. I think one would have to read the magazine from its inception until now in order to respond adequately to some of the things you are suggesting.

STAFFRIDER: The fact that the majority of the contributors to the magazine are black is, in my view, a true reflection of the South African demographic facts. It is mistaken to construe this as evidence of Black Consciousness.

VAN WYK: Yes, that certainly is the case. In this regard I can recall many instances where white writers inquired whether they could submit their work to *Staffrider* and requested a copy of the magazine. Upon receiving it they would reply that the magazine is for blacks. This, of course, is a typical response of someone conditioned by Apartheid.

On the other hand, the relationship between a cultural magazine like *Staffrider* and broader political thinking is a very complicated matter, especially when contending ideologies and political positions make claims to a magazine on the grounds of what they see, or imagine they see reflected in it. However, what remains crucial for me with regard to the establishment of *Staffrider* as well as *Wietie* is that the notion of magazines controlled by blacks was the direct result of the self-reliant philosophy of Black Consciousness. This philosophy, which was by no means a form of racial exclusivity was, I think, operative for only a brief phase in the history of the magazine and certainly gave way to the openly declared non-racial position of the eighties.

STAFFRIDER: You've also mentioned the questions of merit and standards on which I am in agreement with you. Don't you think though that the banings and exiles of the sixties might have had something to do with the nature and quality of the writing which found its way into the magazine?

VAN WYK: Precisely, the repression of the sixties removed a considerable heritage of South African resistance writing. There were at least eight writers who, along with their work, were either banned or went into exile and disappeared from the South African scene. Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Es'kia Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Arthur Maimane, Alex la Guma, Dennis Brutus, Peter Abrahams and others were affected by this. The result was, as Richard Rive likes to say, a situation where South African writing became white by law!

The absence of literary references which could serve as some standard against which young writers could measure their own work meant that they had to start almost from scratch. If one keeps this in mind it is understandable why much of the writing which developed out of June 16 was inadequate. Over the years I have also come to realise that my own attitude at that stage was far too critical and that the wide forum made available by *Staffrider* was necessary and an important process of development. As time went by the critical import of the magazine sharpened especially through the input of figures like

Michael Vaughan and Njabulo Ndebele.

In any case, what also has to be kept in mind is that a literary and cultural magazine does not necessarily exist to display the best writing of a particular society. It serves basically as a forum or meeting place, and in the case of *Staffrider* one of its main purposes was to encourage new writing in South Africa. In this regard *Staffrider* has been an indisputable success.

STAFFRIDER: Njabulo Ndebele's essay in *Staffrider* in which he introduced the stories of the Turkish writer Yashar Kemal and then proceeded to criticise what he considers the overt political nature and journalistic surface reportage of some black South African fiction, was perhaps one of the most significant critical interventions in the magazine. His warnings against the dangers of explicit political writing could and have been misconstrued by some as a call to jettison the political dimension from fiction. What are your views on these issues?

VAN WYK: I am in complete agreement with Ndebele. For many years, in fact right from the beginning, as I've pointed out, I have held almost the same position, without the same clarity, of course. What is of particular interest to me, however, is the claim that has been made that before 1976 black writers wrote with a white audience in mind hoping that their writings would move influential whites to initiate socio-political change. When this came to naught, it is argued, blacks started writing for blacks. However, if one considers the overtly political nature of the writing after 1976, it becomes rather questionable whether this is really the case. It does not make sense that writing about oppression in a direct fashion would be illuminating for blacks, since the experience of oppression is something with which we are all familiar.

In other words, if South African writing by blacks is indeed aimed at the majority of people in this society then it will have to incorporate the full experience of the people. This does not mean that the political aspect should be expunged from the writing. Since politics is an important part of our experience it should always be retained. This political aspect is, however, often weakened if the writing is not sustained by a rich human and cultural dimension. It would do our writing a great deal of good if writers portrayed the people in all their complexity.

STAFFRIDER: I think we are now entering a period where we will be able to make distinctions between complex, considered and penetrating literary articulations and instances of immediate reflex responses to oppression. I do also, however, think that the development of a complex and inclusive literature will be a protracted process while the agit-prop or overtly political kind of writing will remain a feature of South African culture for as long as there is a political struggle against Apartheid.

VAN WYK: Yes, I do not think we can artificially hasten the process towards a richer writing. It will involve intensive work, and as you know, the process

of cultural development is a painstaking one. Under the present circumstances it would also be unreasonable to be intolerant of literary manifestations which are immediate responses to the oppressive situations in South Africa. But we have to make the necessary critical distinctions and avoid upholding such writing as sufficient.

In this regard, I recall Ndebele pointing out the absurdity of the dilemma faced by South African writers. For instance, in most other places a writer who wanted to write creatively, compellingly and perhaps allegorically about a particular theme would have to spend months to dream up some of the things which the South African government has made an everyday reality of life in this country. The State has, so to speak, stolen all the metaphors from the writers by turning life into such a horrific thing that it requires an extraordinary imaginative effort to respond to this creatively.

STAFFRIDER: Do you think the non-racial democratic movement with its populist content; to which you referred earlier, could provide the basis for significant new developments in South African writing?

VAN WYK: You know I have always been impressed by the power and profundity of some of the images of the seventies, despite my reservations and criticisms. I am still overwhelmed by the extent to which people without an accessible literary heritage emerged from the ravages of Bantu education and produced a literature which people inside the country and all over the world stood up to listen to. It is, however, very difficult to say how the current movement with its non-racial perspective will crystallise in imaginative writing.

It is nevertheless an exciting and challenging period for political activists and cultural workers. It means that we can't be complacent or rest on our laurels. We have to search for new modes of expression and this will not be easy. I do not have simple and ready-made solutions. I do know, however, that my own writing is changing and this is probably also the case with other writers.

Currently, there are children in detention, there are new brutal forms of repression used by the State. We have to respond to these horrors by finding metaphors which will not only sustain our people in the struggle but will also undercut the oppressive grip of the State.

Poetry



Stories
The work of
Munira Nadeem,
Susan S. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
W. M. G. and
Thomas M. Lewis

Graphics
Illustrations
by Bruce K. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
and others

Photos
A. K. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
Thomas M. Lewis,
and others

Poetry
Munira Nadeem,
Susan S. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
W. M. G. and
Thomas M. Lewis



AMANDLA
Munira Nadeem

June 1976
Munira Nadeem

Fikile
Richard M. Kelly

Gallery
Munira Nadeem

Reviews
Munira Nadeem,
Susan S. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
and others

Poetry
Munira Nadeem,
Susan S. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
W. M. G. and
Thomas M. Lewis

Stories
Munira Nadeem,
Susan S. Brown,
Richard M. Kelly,
W. M. G. and
Thomas M. Lewis

Still riding
A. K. Brown, Peter
Brown, Richard M. Kelly

Staffrider


Volume Three Number Three September/October 1988 Price \$1.00 (US)

Staffrider

Volume Three Number Four December/January 1988 Price \$1.00 (US)



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Njabulo Ndabole	The Music of the Violin
Charles Mungoshi	Some Kinds of Wounds
Peter Wilhelm	JAZZ
Carol Hemer	The Diary of Maria Thalo

Nineteen Seventy-Six

Go nineteen seventy-six
We need you no more
Never come again
We ache inside.
Good friends we have
Lost.
Nineteen seventy-six
You stand accused
Of deaths
Imprisonments
Exiles
And detentions.
You lost the battle
You were not revolutionary
Enough
We do not boast about you
Year of fire, year of ash.

Oupa Thando Mthinkulu

The Moving Graves

Here I am thinking of owning tracks of knowledge
trying hard to recollect my thoughts
lonely in the greatest of companies – all round
smiling like the skull of my forefathers.

I see graves before me
People die and are graves
They are open and moving
They are the moving graves

The sun is cold inside me
A chill is in my frozen bones
There is a surprise in my hair
My blood shudders with fear.

O Camouflage, Camouflage
I wish to shut you out of my world!

Masilo Isaac Rabothata

The New Anthem

In our thousands we sang
requiem to the dying system
as they have done to falling dynasties
all through the continent.

We were amazed for it was like a soldier
going down fighting
faced with a colossal dilemma:
to fall in the battlefield
or to die a cripple in parliament.

Nevertheless we marched in glory
Higher still we raised our banners
Spelling salvation in black and white.

The kids were flag carriers
For mascots we never loved those hippos
but only the sensitive Soweto dogs at night
history had been done justice
we had our certificates as mementos
of a companion we never really approved.

T. Makhetha

Petition to My Interrogators

Baas,
when you come for me
two hours before dawn,
there will be no lightning or earthquakes,
nor even, in these busy times, an entry in the occurrences diary.

but .
it might cause some trouble.

no Baas,
i don't mean trouble with the *confession*.
i'm sure that can be fixed up in the usual businesslike manner
— a few sleepless days & nights standing,
helpful coaching of fists, encouragement of boots, perhaps;
at most, a touch or two of electro-convulsive therapy
will tidy up any contradictory admissions (you can always
keep my cell light switched off to hold the power bills down).

so there will be no serious problems getting my signature
at the bottom of a blank affidavit form,
or, if you prefer, a voluntary self-written confession
to Terrorism, High Treason, Sabotage,
Eating my great-aunt, Inciting political strikes,
causing the Twentieth Century, desecrating the Sabbath,
or whatever Security and the State require that week.

no Baas,
that's not the trouble.
what i mean is: i don't want to inconvenience you
with the problem of garbage disposal
(i mean my post-mortem & inquest)

i could go on a hunger-strike,
but the socialists know i'm a bit of a glutton,
so the underground would never swallow that one.

perhaps i could be found hanged in my cell,
but the liberals know i'm an atheist, with no afterlife to look forward to,
so amnesty international would sarcastically query a verdict of suicide.

naturally i could always fall from a tenth-floor windowsill
or down a staircase or two,
but my friends know i'm a member of the mountain climbers club,
so the press would never believe it.

of course, i could break my neck falling over a chair,
or hit my head against your office wall,
but my family always complained i was stiff-necked,
& my teachers all said i've got the thickest skull they'd ever seen,
so who would that convince?

if pressed, i could try to slip on a bar of soap,
but the board of jewish deputies is as frightfully touchy
about bars of soap as over tattooed lampshades,
so in these times of unusual diplomatic alliances
the foreign affairs ministry would not consider it very tactful.

lastly, i could attempt to die of a stroke
but having normal blood pressure & being a blood donor,
my doctor-father would never accept such a death certificate.

so perhaps Baas
(to save you all this inconvenience)
why not just leave me alone?

Keith Gottschalk

it's only your imagination

it's only your imagination, only a dream
don't tremble so, my love
no, don't cry, don't think
just go back to sleep

i'll stay with you, i promise
keep awake the whole night long
only, don't tremble so, my love
don't cry, don't think
just go back to sleep

the house is safe, the children, i
the dog's not barking, it's your imagination
the cat is curled beside the fire
don't tremble so, my love
don't cry, don't think
just go back to sleep

you must believe me, it's only a dream
there's no danger, now or ever
the earth is not ablaze, how can it be
i have never known a quieter, more beautiful night
don't tremble so, my love
don't cry, don't think
just go back to sleep

when you wake up tomorrow you will find
the earth not scarred, the church still there
the shops open, friends everywhere
there has been no disturbance, not even a fire
it was all your imagination, all a dream
come, don't tremble so, my love
don't cry, don't think
just go back to sleep

Shabbir Banoobhai

Forgotten People

Broken
rusty
and hanging gates
fallen leaves on unswept yards
where mangy dogs stretch out their empty beings
and where fowls peck fruitlessly at unwashed dishes
I saw him the old man on an old bench seated
leaning his old back against the crumbling mud walls
thoughts far off man's reach and sight
and like the setting sun
he gave way to the dying embers of life
and slowly he slouched in to bed
with a dry and an empty stomach
to await another empty day or death

Nkathazo ka Mnyayiza

There is ...*(after Victor Caíasus)*

Undeniably there is.

There is a truth
with rings wider than a poet's eye

There is a battling nature
Now threatened by pollution
and sprawling cities

There is, continually
nature's freedom
despite the moon landings
despite the heart transplants

There is, with all the odds against
a will to watch a child grow
Even if it is in a littered street
Or in a shack where rain pours
as water through a sieve

There is a laughter
brimful with the turbulence of man

There is a hope
fanned by endless zeal
decisive against the spectre of Sharpeville
hardened by the tears of Soweto

There is a thunder path
that stretches into jungle heights
where wolves whine and howl
where camouflage is nature's flak guns
where the dream of Pierre Mulele has revived

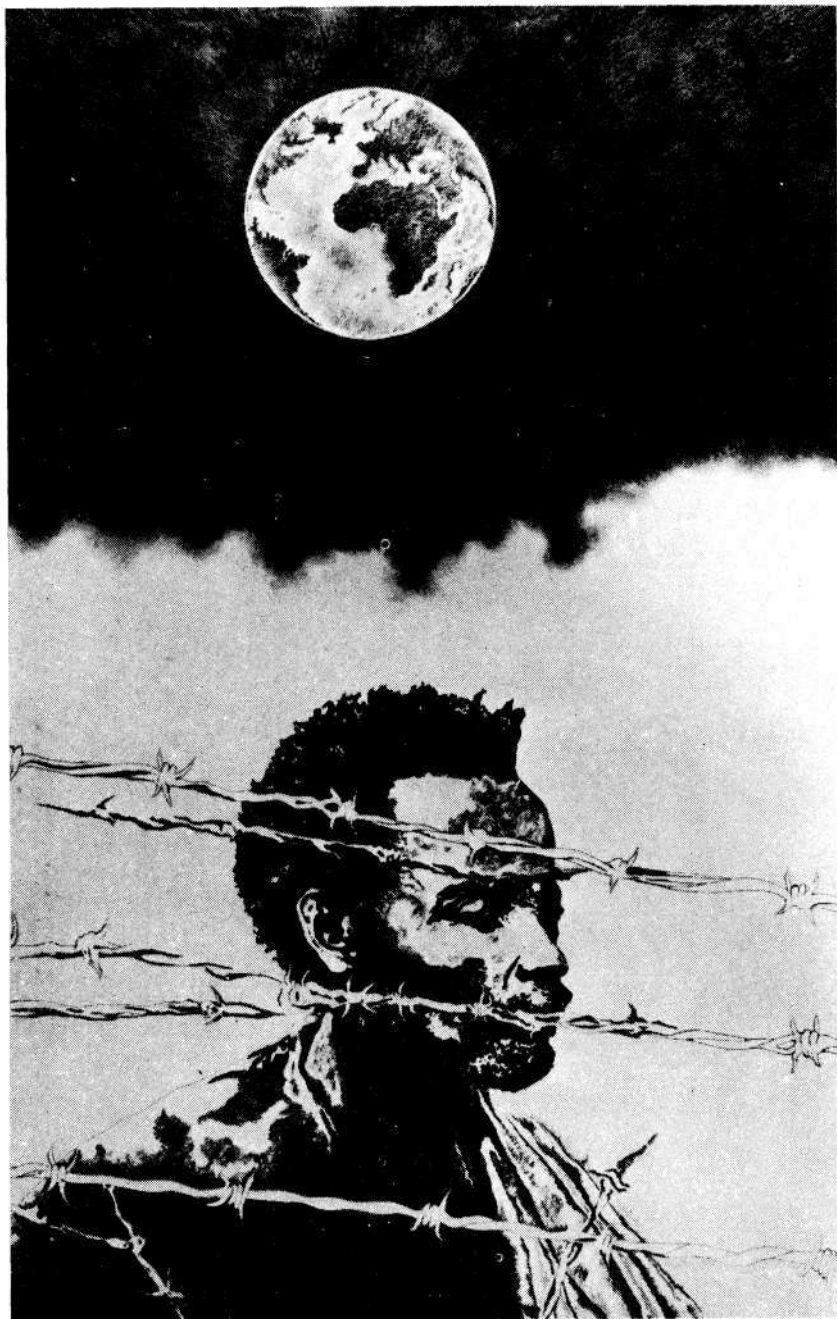
There is cause to stand
and utter words hurtful
to those who skulk
in the wilderness of lies
and bias

For there to be
For there to be facts 'other than'
is our human asset.

Mafika Gwala



Nils Burwitz *Mafika Gwala*



Dikobe Martins For My Brothers in Exile

Versions of Progress

(For Kuntu 'Tame-a-mamba' Moalusi)

*'What matters for us is not
to collect facts and behaviour
but to find their meaning'*

Frantz Fanon

Man has been to the moon
spreading umbilical concepts
of electronics & space radiation
fast breeding robot men;
Computers have given man
a faded character
– all part of cancer identity;
In ugly mirth we rejoice
over every technological success
& call it progress
Thus welcoming
the Age of the Plastic Man

Yet

we still wonder about the Abominable
Snowman of the Himalayas
We learn of monies poured
into diving schemes to solve
the mystery of the Loch Ness monster
Americans also have their Dollar Quiz
over the Yeti
There's now talk of strange prehistoric
creatures in equatorial Afrika

But

when Zulus spoke with understanding
of the bloodsucking umdlebe tree
that bleats like a goat to lure
its victim
the sages were shocked.
Again when my people spoke of
the ivimbela, a flying snake
that only moved in a tornado cloud
dictionaries translated the flying reptile
to mean 'whirlwind'

No surprise then
that baffled colonials called
Langalibalele's rainmaking powers a fake;
Simply that the exemplars of enquiry
were losing step with evolution

Am I surprised
to find the world still without
enough food to feed its mouths?
Still without enough shelter
for its millions?
Worse, what when surplus food is dumped
or destroyed just to maintain gross profit?

My oldman once told me
(I was almost eleven then):
In order not to cheat examples
precedents need not be followed
or lawyers would not have to fight cases
Like other boys of my kinsgroup
I was licensed to eat to my wish
I enjoyed karawala which my mother
prepared with flavouring care
With my friends we ate
the cane rat — ivondwe
We chowed wurumbu
We trapped the chicken-snapping hawk
for meat
We fished the eel, the sea fish
and the freshwater fish
We chowed and swallowed imbazas raw
Nothing happened
Our boyhood appetites were breaking taboos
as different cultures converged
harmoniously
whilst we learned the ABC's of
instant remedy
and instant side-effects

In Afrika
when a snake sticks out its forked tongue
it is pleading for justice
It's not the tongue of the snake
that bites.

Mafika Gwala

I, the Hen

Picking
one by one
 picking all day
one by one
 scratching
the ground all day long
 swallowing the grain
one by one
 that is me
 the hen
nothing to store
no time to rest
 that is me
 the hen.

Julius Chingono

An Epitaph

Here lies Stephen Pwanya
a renowned gentleman
who lived to forty-five.
He is survived by his pipe.
The smoke could not wait
and took to the wind.

Julius Chingono

We Can't Meet Here, Brother
(for Thami Mnyele)

We can't meet here, brother.
We can't talk here in this cold stone world
where whites buy time on credit cards.

I can't hear you, brother!
for the noise of the theorists
and the clanging machinery of the liberal Press!

I want to smell the warmth of your friendship, Thami
Not the pollution of gunsmoke and white suicides.

We can't meet here, brother.
Let's go to your home
Where we can stroll in the underbrush of your paintings
Discuss colour
Hone assegais on the edges of serrated tongues.

Chris van Wyk

My Mother

My mother could never carry me
while they used the warmth of her womb
to forge their hearts into hatred

My mother could never wean me
because they dried her out
until her tits were arid tufts of drought

My mother could never embrace me
while she kept house for them
held their children

My mother is
a boesman meid
a kaffir girl
a koelie aunty
who wears beads of sweat around her neck
and chains around her ankles

But, defrocked of dignity
my mother has broken free of the heirlooms
of oppression

These days she dresses in the fatigues of those
grown tired of serving evil gods

Now my mother is dressed to kill

Chris van Wyk

The Reason

The reason why
murderers and thieves
so easily
become statues
are made into monuments
is
already their eyes are granite
their hearts
are made
of stone

Chris van Wyk

**a young man's thoughts before
june the 16th**

tomorrow i travel on a road
that winds to the top of the hill
i take with me only the sweet
memories of my youth
my heart aches for my mother
for friday nights with friends
around a table with the broad belch of beer
i ask only for a sad song
sung by a woman with downturned eyes
and strummed by an old man with
a broken brow
o sing my sad song sing for me
for my sunset is drenched with red

Fhazel Johennesse

When I Die

(a poem Sobukwe might have written)

When I die
may my funeral (like my life) be political
and serve the struggle
may my people
use my coffin as a platform
to raise the banner

When I die
may my body be used
to awaken the indifferent and complacent tribe
my eyes, to trace dreams and hopes
shattered by injustice
my ears be used as drums
to recall the cries
of the dispossessed and downtrodden

When I die
may fiery speeches and freedom songs
replace passive hymns
may the Green and Gold and Black
fly at every mountain

May my loved ones take up the torch
and destroy the lies
written into our history
so that a new Brotherhood may emerge
to embrace our land

When I die
may some poet
write of the agony
and deep pain
that followed my days
and the inhumanity
of my captivity

The Relationship

What joins us may be blood
but not our forbears, features, names,
nor mutual love, a common faith,
any sibling resemblance
in our contrast lives.
Fixed at a see-saw distance
we're bound, being counterweighed —
your fall or rise against
my rise or fall.
So we are brothers because —
because I am related to my shadow
and because as I breathe you exhale,
I am your brother as shape
is shaped by negative shape
and as whatever is taken
determines what is left.
What I have of you is what I am
yet makes you more yourself
and what I pay to ease your fatefulness
only confirms how each of us
is still the thing he is.
We two can't trade
for peace and freedom from this,
the curse of causing each other.
To be cured and rid of you
I must become yourself.
But how do I begin,
my brother?

Lionel Abrahams

These two poems by Lionel Abrahams appeared in his collection *Journal of a New Man* published by Ad Donker, 1984.

The Issue

The enemy is clearly marked
in black or white.
Shades between confuse the issue.

You have to be against whom you're not for:
there's no neutrality,
no switching sides — the thought
compounds your treachery
with confusion of the issue.
Doubt, change, give-and-take,
contradictions, exceptions
and fine distinctions
brake the action and confuse the issue.

Humanitarians confuse the issue
through tolerance.
Moderates confuse the issue
through compromise.
Progressives confuse the issue
through optimism.
Liberals confuse the issue
through criticism of both sides.
Partisans of common cause
confuse the issue
through indiscriminate goodwill.

Those who defect from their known place
to mingle in unwall'd markets
and barter inherited science
for whatever language they can learn
have yet to understand
their profit's futile
since they confuse the issue.
Understanding is not the issue.

The issue involves attack and defence.
If you're not for the victory
of your own sort, your country,
party, ethnic category right

or wrong, you count for nothing,
 you only confuse the issue.
 The question of actual benefits
 confuses the issue.
 Reason confuses the issue.
 Hope confuses the issue.

The issue is, on the set day,
 having prepared, having received
 the clear final word of command,
 doing what is to be done to the enemy —
 and he is clearly marked.

Lionel Abrahams

bra bizza dink according change

well gents
 julle moet verstaan dat
 ons het by die lanie gegaan
 om te sê how long?
 ons weetie om te sê ons is dik
 van die apartheid style
 hy het ons só gekyk en hy weetie
 well you see we are changing slowly
 maar nê man ons kan mossie forever wag
 en ek wat bra bizza is vertel jou jack
 ons sal wag tot piet kom
 nou my maak uit
 as die lanie nie change nie
 dan moet ons van self change
 genuine jack
 die change lê by ons
 nie by die lanie nie

Fhazel Johannesburg

Loveknots (or Songs for Liberation)

1. My lover's hands are warm
But they carry a knife
He promises no harm
then hacks at my life.
2. My lover says he loves me
But cannot love me only
My lover says he loves me
His loving leaves me lonely.
3. (If the music's loud enough
You cannot hear the rain)
If I can hate enough
I might not feel the pain.
4. Drive a stake through the heart
It is the only way
For love is the final trap
It lasts a year and a day.

Cherry Clayton

Giovanni Jacopo Meditates
(on his *Regio absens*)

There is a green Place of mossed Rocks,
Tall trunks, a Stream, compliant Grass;
Foliage filtering the Sun
Or a blond Moon – you can so choose!
The Stream, naturally, chuckles,
& is, like the Azure, cloudless.

Hunters & Haunted, the Shutters,
The Shut, the Spaces between, that nameless Horde
– Everyone else – has simply departed.
From the Near-Distance jut Ruins
Of a Monastery, with one
Good Room: Table & Clavichord.

There are Books, Chairs, a Four-Poster.
Close by, on Eiderdowns & Silks,
Dreams a Maiden – closer than the
Benign Unicorn rootling through
The Orange Bushes. She is age-
Less, comely without Cosmetics.

Her Waist is thin; her Expression
Earnest; Legs expressive & long,
Of stunning Shapeliness; Breasts of
Neither Import nor Gravity.
There are lengthy Pauses from Speech:
Stillnesses that counterfeit Song.

The Deep-Freeze is stocked for a Siege.
Who has stroked his Tongue above the Fringe
Of an unadorned Eyelid the Texture
Of a Rose-Petal, within this
Forgotten Country of the Mind,
Calling himself less than a King?

Douglas Livingstone

Giovanni Jacopo Meditates
(on a Species of Don)

His smouldering Exordiums
Pound an Audience restively bored.
There's growled Petulance, a few staled Maxims,
Two Syllables when he's floored.

There's cross-eyed Dialectic,
Speech stumbled, angry, drunk:
The Halls of a Higher Eclectic
Have spawned this Species of Punk.

While lusty for Public Drama,
He feels Student-Groupies the best.
While his Heart is in Havana,
His Codpiece holds the Rest.

In his obligatory Denim,
With his oddly linear Thought,
This failed and static Pilgrim,
In Triumph, arrives at Nought.

Bull-dust, is his final Ponderance,
Bull-dust, is his Clincher for All,
The Whole of his cerebral Ordnance,
His consummate Mating-Call.

Douglas Livingstone

Let Me Be an Apple

Hanging like a ball of flame,
 the beautiful red apple glows
 between the cool shade of the
 curly green leaves.
 Nursed like a baby and duly wet,
 the apple grows from beauty to
 export maturity.
 Freely she hangs until ripeness sheds her from her mother's womb.
 Neatly wrapped and packed,
 freely she leaves the sunny
 shores of Africa for Europe
 without the fears and frustrations
 of an exit permit.
 In banquets and at royal tables she becomes the
 apple of everybody's eye.
 So rather let me be an apple than a slave on an apple farm.

Leonard Koza

Laughing Xhosa Patients Gathered around a White Baby

Their laughter is as fragrant
 as an apple slit by the sun.
 Lightdaggers penetrate the
 pram that looms like a
 cherrymountain overlooking
 the mirth. The baby does not
 whimper at the cloudless sky.
 Why should he? No misery brushes
 the brow of the fields whence
 these patients come. There
 are no luxuries, only laughter,
 to assuage the sickness of the
 veld. The laughing figs are dry.

Roy Joseph Cotton

The Battle of Isandhlwana*

January 22, 1897

Isandhlwana!
Let me tell you bwana,
Is a mountain shaped
More like a hut
And close to my heart.

It was spot-lit
In the dark continent
When the sun's pair of scissors
Cut the dawn of that day
When right triumphed over might.

It is more like a hut
And close to my heart
Whenever I walk in the heat
Of man's endless greed.

It is more like a hut
The walls of my pride
The seat of my wisdom
The base of my freedom.

It is more like a hut
Like a song in my heart
With lines of a lesson
To guide its heritage
Into history's next page.

*The Zulu word *isandhlwana* means *more like a hut*

Mandla Ndlazi

A Visit to Isandhlwana*July 15, 1978*

Wings of concern carried me
To the solemn monument
Where I bowed on my knee
Just a moment the other day
And spoke to my ancestors.

The gaping mountain craned
Over the memories
And silent graves
Of a British mistake.

My shudder pulsed from there
Reaching callous clouds that gather
To darken the counsel of peace

And I heard a bull bellow
As it pawed the dust
Shattering the thoughtful silence
Of rolling rock-strewn plains,
And a vulture flapped across
The film set readied to re-enact
A folly that's familiar.

Mandla Ndlazi

The Day I Was Taken

The day i was taken from my office was as
inauspicious as any other day except being
the end of the month and a little hotter
than usual

The morning newspapers read that three more people
had been detained – two women and a man. Perhaps
women's lib has asserted itself in the struggle
for liberation

News of the arrest didn't startle me. It has been
happening with regular monotony. Our oppressor-doctors
trying to cure our political fever with doses of detention;
failures consigned to the disposal ward

Francis, our office typist, fright-filled face, said that two
men wanted to speak to me at the reception desk. Her face
told me that it was my turn. My fever must've reached a
critical stage

I would've known them even if they hadn't identified themselves.
Their odour wrinkled my nostrils. The oppressed can distinguish
his oppressor even if he sends his hounds and the hounds have
the same colour as the oppressed

Their voices droned as i was informed that i had to come along.
I was to be detained under Code 100 of the Eternal Safety
Measure to safeguard the fatherland from communists and
agitating thoughts

My period of detention started from then and was to end six months
later. I was to be held because the oppressor-doctors had
decided that my symptoms were alarming and i would infect others
if i remained outside

Health lecture completed, i was escorted by the hounds. An almost
new car was parked at the kerb. I sat in the back. They didn't
bother to lock the doors. A writer seems to have status among
the hounds

Booked, listed and particulars taken, i was deposited in a cell twice the size of my township toilet. The smell of prison cells has become familiar and i concentrated on six months in solitary confinement with an occasional visit from an oppressor-doctor

James Matthews



K.D. Mantloa *Encounter at Rorkes Drift*

girls

leafter hair,
 red straw in
 your shadows,
 in your eyes
 of mint the
 chastity of
 forgotten
 carnivals; your
 music is the rain
 of the quiet, your
 haste the stoney
 sludge of fools.

Roy Joseph Cotton

Learning to Drive

They sit in groups
Under the shade of Misuma trees,
Old men and young men,
Sixty or more,
Talking,
The truck roaring and groaning unceasingly
While each unmindful takes his turn.

They are not talking of bantustan politics,
Nor of women like migrant workers,
They are talking of driving –
Of rude traffic cops,
Of those that conduct
Oral tests for a learner's licence.

Come Thursday
It's off to the testing ground
And the dusty streets of Sibasa:
Half of them will go through for sure
(A green note can take care of that)
But . . . what will they drive?

Maano Dzeani Tswana

On Top of the Magalies*For Nape á Motana*

I pray and sing
Drink and dance
On top of the Magalies
Look
Those are our mealie fields
And there are Afrikaner bulls grazing

Bleeding bantu lovers
Smoke Senior Service
At their ease in Braamfontein:
We in Brits hold a pipe
Leaning on the muur of a dam
Gazing at a thousand bantu arses
Greeting heaven

Amin may be the greatest marksman in Uganda
Let him pip south of the Limpopo
Where each family numbers more than thirty
We know our job and we are at it
We fed the bantu with the pill
To spend his days at the family planning clinic
And walk around with VD

Maano Dzeani Tuvani

Johannesburg November

The winter gone in hate.
The summer.
Invisible in sunlight,
Tongues of flame
Crawl the street.

Maddening, the city swelters,
The suburbs deep in roses,
Jacarandas.
The hovels and high-rises steam,
Squat,
As old as ovens, bread,
As old
As smoke and ashes,
Sweat.

And somewhere in the city
You are waiting:
Your eyes are grey, they see
The smoke and ashes.
You madden in the heat.
I write of you.
I touch you in the city.

Dogs shamble in the yard,
Fly blatant at what passes.
This is rage.
So; falling back, sequestered,
They crouch among the flowers.

The stink of blossom. Wind,
Sour,
Comes breathing into lives.
Pours off.
It pours across the maps
And these are streets.

I touch you in my life, the city.

Giving and taking, nothing and glut,
It is older than itself.

Fattening, it squats upon itself
In flames that burn
Invisible in sunlight; streets
On fire where a child's hand,
Black, a fist is raised against the flowers,
Dog-nosed, the blatant
Glut and sweat.

I touch you in the heat.

Doors opening and closing.
Contracts, bread.
The jacarandas squat and flower.
The wasted petals, purple
On the street,
Explode and stink.
The wind is hot. An oven.

Giving and taking, all was here,
Here in the coming.
It was human. It was bread.
They crouch among the roses.

I touch my sweat. A concentration.
I live within the city in my love.
I touch you now:
The wind is in your eyes, the flame
That crawls the street,
The blossom.

The city is my life and you are in it.

Patrick Cullinan
1976

Photograph of a Communist

And even while the mouth is smiling
At her elder child, eruptive
At the edge of the table, gurgling
With flirtatious pleasure – the eyes sift
The same smile to the watchfulness
Of a moment's unsheltered thinking.

Trapped out of the way near a town
Of the drained marshes where the people
Won't speak to her kind, can't; where the isolation
Of marsh islands left its tale
Of inturned villagers; her fine philosophic mind finds shift
To calm frustration in a lived interim.

Her husband sits, tries to understand England, get the pattern right;
His brown hands whittle toys;
His intricate intelligence renews the start
Of its long circulation through minute particularities
Of its own day-shift, night-shift; computes
Always to the same total that counts him out.

She hears the voices: 'You chose it.'
Yet knows: this life is decent, cleanly:
The factory shifts, the scythe, the goats,
Each other, the wild child and the meditative one.
No more collaboration than is necessary.
Here no battle was lost.

But there are worse voices: the time ahead is slow;
She watches it approach like a long tunnel, her cage
Of everywhere exile. She has also heard the voice that says:

Not too long ago

It was decided. There will be no more change:
The world will always belong
To those it belongs to now.

Peter Strauss

What Is Death?

Mother, what is death?
Death is a stray bullet,
That hit your sister at school.
Father, what is death?
Death is when your brother
Dies in detention.
Teacher, what is death?
Death is deep sleep.
Doctor, what is death?
Death is when brains and heart
Cease to function.
Hangman, what is death?
Death is a day's job.
Priest, what is death?
Death is a chariot which
Takes us to our Heavenly Father,
To live everlasting life.
Grave-digger, what is death?
Death is hardwork for me.
Undertaker, what is death?
Death is profit.
When they cry all the way to the cemetery
I laugh all the way to the bank.

Abia Ramalebo Diutloileng

Tshisa-Nyama

The very fact that it is isolated
From other shops proves the reality:
This is a Bantu Special Restaurant
Owned by all Italian team-mates.

The pap, you braai till it turns chocolate brown
The meat and the wors, you leave in the red oven
Till it resembles our customers' colour.
The binnegoetes, you leave half-raw, half-cooked.

The shop, you don't label the name.
The tables must be of hard steel, the chairs as well.
The plates must be of aluminium,
The spoons, big, round and rusty.

The advertisement must be fuming smoke
That is burning meat and pap.
Let a Bantu man call it Tshisa-nyama,
We don't mind the queries and all such.

The soup must be made from a cheap recipe,
The ingredients as costless as ever.
The sweets must be sticky, and also Dube-Dubes.
Cigarettes? mainly B.B., Lexington and Mboza.

When he orders he must be as audible as a motor horn.
Should he warble like a swallowing Bull,
Give him any item in front of you –
He'll not lodge even a single complaint.

Business manners – not applicable to him.
Just shout at him: 'Funani Bhizzah?'
He'll never wrinkle – 'Funa Pap en Steik!'
And then draw shekels from a dirty horseshoe-pouch.

Same, must be wrapped in an inky Newspaper,
He must eat outside on the dusty stoep.
Who does he think will clean for him
After finishing with all those remnants?

The suitable drinks served are usually:
 Al Mageu, Hubbly-bubbly and Pint –
 If he wants something decent, try next door!
 We sell only Bantu appetising stuff here.

He must eat like a pig stuck in the mud,
 His teeth must emphasize the echo of the
 Battle with the whitish-pink coarse tongue.
 He's mos never taught any table decency!

It is a restaurant solely for Bantus.
 No other race has any business to interfere,
 The food sold here is absolutely fire-smelling:
 Sies! I'll never eat that kind of junk! Ga!

Tshisa Thixo safa Yindelelo!

Daizer Mqhaba

The Voortrekkers

Trek further white man
 Powerless to love
 Without any illusion
 Recalling no vision
 The hold is of the gun
 The Laager swept clean
 Hamburg Groningen Haarlem
 All ports of chance
 Abandoned centuries ago
 Find again the absent cities
 Take up the threads of an
 Eighteenth century dream
 Lest the black sniper's bullet
 Find soft marrow of bone
 The wagon wheels have left
 Only ruts in the road

Sheila Fugard

Silence in Jail!

*Nothing was sadder
there was no more saddening want
than the deadly lack
of music*

Dennis Brutus

They don't like music in prison
so they banned Dennis Brutus's poems
and Wopko Jensma's poems
and Breyten Breytenbach's poems
and James Matthews's poems
and my own poems

They hate music and poems
and pictures and statues
they have cleaned out the country:
there is silence between its bare walls
the silence of bones in the desert
cleaned by the vultures

But unaccountably
music crosses the border
on waves of ether
through every crack
between heavily armed border posts

'Eine kleine Nachtmusik'
this serene joy invading
the muscles of my body
revolutionary music
written against the dreary dictates
of puritan dominees
who don't like music and dancing and serenading
in their straight-laced
country-wide jail

Beethoven's fifth revolution
breathing courage into our heart
is knocking at the door

defying the corrupt little giants
 ministers of state
 at whose absolute pleasure
 you may be detained
 in our own Bastille

Tshaikovsky's victorious canons
 repulsing the would-be colonizer of Russia
 succeeded to hunt the gloriozier army of France
 across the entire continent of Europe
 and his ringing church bells give us the courage
 that we can too

Theodorakis' songs from Orobos jail
 the 'takketak ego, takketak esy'
 communicating hope through the stone walls
 Wolf Biermann's songs from Chausseestrasse 131
 ('Thus or thus the earth will be red')
 and Bertolt Brecht crowing
 his venomous ballads
 about workers' solidarity

There are too many holes in the net
 there are too many cracks in the wall
 there are too many radios on the air
 the growing number of censors
 scramble round frantic white ants
 cementing the crumbling structure
 catching invaders in their poisonous embrace
 breathlessly while armies of new ones enter
 Exhausted they attach their stickers
 to ever new songs: Banned for possession

But music (lalalla lallala la)
 'The royal fireworks'
 'The New World'
 'The Emperor' and the 'Eroica'
 triumphantly sweeps them away
 helter skelter
 in ever growing waves of glorious hope

Peter Horn

A Letter to Bandi*

This letter comes to you
empty of the things
I wanted to say
empty of the shock, the horror,
the pain of the day
framing only black marks
on a white page
framing only hopes
in a fearful age
this letter comes to you
with all my love
but
empty of the things
I wanted to say
framing only black marks
on a white page.

Kriben Pillay

**This poem was written on the occasion of the detention of Bandi Mvovo, on 11 September 1978.*

I Am

Sometimes I gaze defiantly
back at this blinking soulless
City of many eyes

I even refuse to come near
its parks for I've never
smelt the fragrance of its
roses
My blood boils in my veins

Then there's this voice
that keeps telling me
the sun never sets
It's the earth turning

When I go back to my reality
I see my Soweto
Its scarred soul lying helplessly
Beneath tabernacles of the law

Beloved
Every time I rise to fight
Defending what remains
The ruins I treasure
Yours, mine, ours
I feel I can kill
War without terms

But then – here I am
I come to you as I am:
Hopeless

Themba ka Miya

For Your Defence

Afrika!
Grow a big head
And
Sharpen your elbow.

Makhulu wa Ledwaba

Freedom

If the freedom I cry for
is beneath the big Marula tree
I'll use my hands to dig it free.

Makhulu wa Ledwaba

Wooden Spoon

I carved a spoon from a rose-root
and, though thornless, its shape was strange,
conforming with the twisted nature
of the rose's journey into the earth.

Grandfather carved a straight spear
of a fine yellow wood;
melted ironstone with oxfat
and beat the blade on a rock,
and, blessing it with leaves and milk,
he whirled it into the air.
In response to gravity
it pierced his heart.

Now I eat with a crooked spoon
which I have dug from my master's garden
and it pierces my heart.

K. Zwide

The Local Games

Fog is turning everything cold and white.
Nevertheless, they're playing mixed doubles
at the Wynberg Lawn Tennis Club tonight.

It's a peculiar kind of tennis, you'll agree.
The men can't find partners to join the sport
simply by strolling round the edge of a court.

They must choose on a corner one block away
and, whether handsome or not, they must pay
for those ladies who often show overmuch

of a brown or black thigh, think that for tennis
a non-white skirt and cheap plastic boots are fine,
and even elect to serve yards from the base-line,

bent over the bonnet of a car. And there're no
rackets or shouts, though sometimes a false moan.
Then the men take their balls and drive off home.

The angry club members in big houses nearby
say all this on their daughters' daytime wicket
is really not what anyone could call cricket.

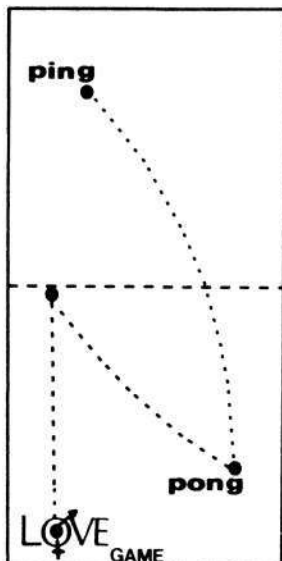
But I am one who would remind them of patriotism.
Let our sports critics rant in Tel-Aviv or Bonn.
All's obviously well here while our local games go on.

Jeremy Gordin

Era

some were engirthed with a canopy
 of remorse some among us cried
 like crocodiles some listened to the hokum
 of 'instigators and tomato sauce' some
 licked their fingers after a clutch

at the burnt bridges others immediately
 dumped everything another slipped down
 with the night other faces went
 stony in twilight's eye yet
 another preferred to baas this dragon's land.

Jaki Seroke**Just A
Game***Essop Patel*

Black
Recollections



Essop Patel

Ou China en die Amper-Intellectual

Heit! Hoezit daar?

Nee, is sweet my bra.
 Dji's mos skaars né.
 Waar was dji nou-die aan'?'
 Aai, dji't weer 'n aane' dêng gemiss.
 Ou China – dji ken hom mos –
 Hy't 'n anne situation somme' innie fridge gebêre
 Omtesê die situation klim oppie stage
 Nogal gecollar en getie
 En hy adjust sy cufflinks so met 'n style
 En hy bêngênne woerawara in so 'n highbrow lingo
 Iets van die modus operandie of-iets van Capitalism
 En hy wietie what-what van Existentialism
 En Socialism
 En hy gaan aan en aan
 Oor ek-wiet-nie-wat se moerism
 En die majietas bêngênne woeliger raak van die kakpraat
 Maar Ou China hy sit net daar in sy hoek
 Met sy Ayas oor sy ooge en slaap.
 Kanti, net as die situation klaar is met hom spieche,
 En voor die Chairman nog ken opstaan,
 Is Ou China op sy bene
 En hy adjust sy Ayas so op 'n slant
 En hy address die Chairman en die Ladies en Gentlemans
 – Dji ken mos Ou China –
 Nee, daai bra van my het style
 En hy bêngênne om te sê
 Die mense moet hom correct as hy verkeerd is
 Maar hy voestaan omtesê
 Die gentleman het so 'n uur too veel gecable
 Oor 'n deng wat ons in die 'kasies mos ken
 Omtesê, die lahnies ration ons met die lewe.
 En dji wiet wat
 Voor die outies hom nog 'n applause kan tchee
 Sit Ou China somme' wee' nee'
 Trek sy Ayas oor sy ooge
 En slaap.

Farouk Asvat

Possibilities for a Man Hunted by SBs

There's one of two possibilities
Either they find you or they don't
If they don't it's ok
But if they find you
There's one of two possibilities
Either they let you go or they ban you
If they let you go it's ok
But if they ban you
There's one of two possibilities
Either you break your ban or you don't
If you don't it's ok
But if you break your ban
There's one of two possibilities
Either they find out or they don't
If they don't it's ok
But if they find out
There's one of two possibilities
Either they find you guilty or not guilty
If they find you not guilty it's ok
But if they find you guilty
There's one of two possibilities
Either they suspend your sentence or they jail you
If they suspend your sentence it's ok
But if they jail you
There's one of two possibilities
Either they release you
Or you fall from the tenth floor

Farouk Asvat

Afrika (My Peace with Life)

Afrika
You are the horizon
To which I turn
To see the sun rise
To wean the poet
Who praises you daily
For bearing your breasts
To these my seasoned lips
Do not desert me
For I love you
I want to cherish you
Take me into your heart
For you are the path
Whereupon treads my pride
Do not beguile me
For you are the sky
That measures my manhood
And spares me stars
To kindle my soul
Let me drink of you
For you are the river
That flows with vigour
Carrying the taunting tale
Our forefathers died to tell . . .
Afrika
You are my peace with life . . .

Eugene Skeef

Family Planning

Row upon row
Like winter-shaken stalks of maize,
The barracks stretch from one
Miserable end to the other.

Within the enclosed hostel
No gay children bounce and romp about,
No busy housewives colour
The washing line once a week.
Here there is no homely smell of food
That wanders in the air during the day.

Sunset gathers the half-castrated inmates
Like stale crumbs from the city.
They plod through the large gates
Weary, bent: and shut
Their fatigued minds, eyes and ears.
For them the day is over.
They are banished to a twilight life.

The silence that they left behind
At the breaking of the dawn is
Rippled as if it was a calm lake
By laughter as they buzz about
Like newly-wedded women.

They strip off to their vests
Embalmed in a day's sweat.
Yesterday's tripe and porridge are
Hastily warmed up for supper again.

One by one,
They enjoy their naked showers
Splashing their rigid bodies in the water,
And return to their stuffy rooms.

An inmate belches like a sea-rover.
It echoes in the far-flung room.
He raps his full stomach

That is large as a mole-hill:
'Exchoose me you bastards!' he thunders.

They slip into their stony beds,
Clasp their baggy and sweat-reeking
Pillows as if they were their
Beloved ones left in the homelands.

They look at their shirts,
Overalls, trousers, jackets — all ragged,
Hanging aslant on the damp walls
Like faded, dusty family portraits.

Portable radios are switched off,
Candle flames flicker and die,
Darkness and silence covers
Them all like a large blanket.
Alone,
They quietly succumb to sleep.

In the night,
An inmate's untroubled sleep is interrupted.
He sits on the edge of his bed
Half dozing,
Gazing from darkness to darkness,
And then he spills the seeds of nature
All over his slovenly sheet with half-satisfaction:
'Family planning,' he whispers to himself.
Then the musical snores
Of the sleep-drowned inmates
Slowly lull him back to sleep.

James Twala



Mzwakhe Nhlabatsi *Mongane Serote*

Time Has Run Out

the bright eye of the night keeps whispering
when it paves and pages the clouds
it is knowledgeable about hideous nights
when it winks and keeps winking like that
it is like a breathing burning wood —
i feel looked at
walking and silent like this in the night
in this strange land which mutes screams.
the night
with its vague and bright eye-ball
which bears boot-prints and flags
eats away into the bone of the distance of my life
this i know,
and the night knows it too
so
the bright eye of the night keeps whispering and whispering
and the stars with their distance
keep whistling and whistling
throbbing on my memory about the distances we made
yes —
We did make distances
whose milestones are, as we all know
broken droplets of blood which are now splashed
and are scattered on the streets
on fences
and on walls of houses we live in
and on ceilings
on floors and on desks
even on floors of land-rovers.
i said i feel looked at
walking this silent night like this
alone —
cars, with their treacherous big eyes
stare —
and speed past me, leaving their red glow with me
leaving me with the night
whose thick darkness touches my eye-balls
and keeps dancing into my face
with every footstep i make;
i walk the night of this land

i hear crickets chirp
and see prostitutes at street corners
feel shirt and underpants stick to my flesh
and i count the red lights along village road
smell the green of the tall grass
i'm all over this little town
and,
the stars keep whistling and whistling.
listen —
these fucking stars
whistled like this once long ago
when one man
walked like all of us do
and then he was naked
and then he was chained on the leg
and then he was on the floor covered with a blanket
in a land-rover
destined to make 1 000 km in that state
to another cell
where he woke up one morning
naked
chained
alone
with brain damage, his blanket wet
his eyes strange as they said;
and i dare say
his damaged memory told him now, that he was going to die
in a cell
chained on the leg
wet and naked
alone
the 45th to have made it
into the hands of mad men who believe in God
yet these men did not know
that this man knew
he would make it for his funeral
that the people would claim his battered remains
that he would not be counted among the countless
who were stolen by these men
from their homes,
streets
fields
huts
and disappeared as if they were never born
except that they now float like a rotting corpse would on water
on the memory of the people;

steve knew this
he had to, he was a bright boy
there was a funeral in kingwilliamstown
there have been many many funerals in my country
funerals
of bright babies
whose fresh and young blood was spilled in the streets
by fire-power of God's children
there are commemorations all over the world
of my countrymen
some of whom fought and lost
some fell defenceless
we in my country fought and fell and keep fighting
ask blood river
and soweto will answer
that:

school children took to the street one day. there
will never be another soweto. nor, south africa.
there are many kinds of deaths, and soweto knows
them all, south africa too, and southern africa. you
cannot kill children like cattle and then hope that
guns are a monopoly. we were born like everybody
else, and like everybody else, we know when it is
too late or, to put it another way, when there is
nothing any longer to lose. we made love in strange
places: ghettos. that is, we gave birth in these
holes. we learnt from the pain and sorrow of
having lost our children to so many and such cruel
deaths as malnutrition or murder or sadness even
dying while throwing spears or stones and being
shot dead. we can now say, while we claim our
land and die in the process: our history is a culture
of resistance.

ask southern africa
mozambique
angola
zimbabwe
which we read while some men believe in god
and we know trouble
and say so, by scattering bloody milestones in places
where nobody would ever intend to die,
since the types of deaths which are died in these places
ask us the price of liberation
and we ask ourselves nothing nice now
and south africa answers:
europe took it from us. we fought and lost. the

wheel kept spinning, slowly at first, whipping, as it spun us into position: landless. into mines. factories. tribes. race. ignorance. poverty. cogs of a machine, whose wheel spins and spins, ejects: insane, sick, ignorant, poor men and women, whose children were now caught, in a fast spinning wheel which whipped off more and more landless, uneducated, poor people. bloody. fast, insane. the wheel keeps spinning and spinning. it spins. had spun, and the union of south africa was born, whipping thousands and millions of landless, underpaid, ill-educated men and women, who build cities day and night and rest in ghettos, if they ever do, poor, playing hide and seek with all types of deaths.

yes —

we did make distances
from blood river
to sharpeville to soweto
we know now

that oppression has been unmasked and will act true
to our expectations

we ask, why oppress us
to exploit us
why exploit us

and now we learn, and that is because we are born so
that we should live,

that the chain must be broken

whatever the fuck this chain was made for:

days go by like everyday. we bury the dead who
died cruel and strange deaths. yet, like we said,
memory is like water which shores up rotten corpses.

yet,

that isn't enough

memories don't break chains

nor does dying like dogs or cattle

or throwing stones and bricks at mad armed men

nor do lies at the U.N., or anywhere else.

my people, tell me:

what does, what breaks the chains?

the bright eye of the night keeps whispering and whispering

when it paves and pages the clouds

it is knowledgeable about hideous nights

when it winks and winks like that and the stars keep whistling

it will see us one day

when children, mad at us, will spit and kick us in public
they had their trouble; they ask us about the love we
made so that they could be born

for what?

soweto?

please, can someone, my countrymen, say a word of wisdom.

we need the truth not fiction

when we ask why;

we need to hear words

which, if the lips which make them, do tremble

they do so only because they know

they understand the perilous billows of our country

which we've learnt how to ride

not because they fear us our stare

or they are angry because we do not believe their report.

alas —

time has run out:

too much blood has been spilled. please my

countrymen, can someone say a word of wisdom.

it is too late. blood, no matter how little of it,

when it spills, spills on the brain — on the memory

of a nation — it is as if the sea floods the earth. the

lights go out. mad hounds howl in the dark; ah

now we've become familiar with horror. the heart

of our country, when it makes its pulse, ticking

time, wounds us. my countrymen, can someone,

who understands that it is now too late, who

knows that exploitation and oppression are brains

which, being insane, only know how to make

violence; can someone, teach us how to mount the

wound, the fight.

time has run out —

period.

Mongane Serote

Bloody Tears on Mzimhlophe

No breath of wind over Mzimhlophe,
No crack of sound in the gloomy atmosphere,
No whispering echoes on that dark Tuesday,
No bursts of laughter and delight on that crucial day.
Only death glows in the eyes of Azanians.
Only graves open jaws for the struggling Blacks.
But the power behind enjoyed the battle of Blacks against Blacks.

Songs of the Zulu impi roared,
Residents crawled for safety,
Screams and deaths pierced through hearts,
Spear of brother penetrated brother,
Cries and deaths mocked the innocent.
Life was a toy of circumstances,
Death was a close alternative in the din.
But the power behind rejoiced at the sight of Blacks against Blacks.

Sound of the menacing foe echoed.
Women with children on their backs,
All fighting for a place of safety.
Crying were those whose feet denied them.
Packing and spilling out their goods,
Collapsed in their channel to peace.
Men and boys shivered with fear,
All turned cowards in the face of death.
Scattered were all in the neighbourhood.
But the Man behind enjoyed the plot of Blacks against Blacks.

As night follows day, every aspect changes,
As wind changes direction, every order changes,
Man on the Black hand side,
Struggled back with confidence.
With love and understanding,
They maintained their existence.
Brothers destroyed one another with hostility.
Mighty men of the nation died unnecessarily,
Suffocation claimed life a nonsense
Killing of man by man as ants grew fat.
But the Man behind boasted the deaths
Of Blacks against Blacks.

Burned, swollen and frozen corpses
 Lay scattered in the gloomy cosmos,
 Waiting to be thrown into police-vans
 By the master who had used us as instruments
 'Wenafile - Zulu.'
 Words rolled rhythmically
 And eventually burst into laughter
 While the Black nation
 Was enveloped in a blanket of tears.
 But the power behind
 Scored a victory over Blacks against Blacks.

Landi A. ka Themba

Shaka

It's now that I see
 Shaka's prophecy taking shape
 In this fighter bomber
 My fate is in that engine
 Propelled
 Now that I see
 Shaka - Missionaries prophecy come through
 To its end
 I am right in the bowels of the birds he saw
 In the vultures
 Hovering over those locust swarms he saw
 Plague my harvest season after season
 I am settling the score
 As King Dingane said
 'Kill the witches'
 I am now flying with the birds he saw
 Reigning over my crop
 Shaka's prophecy has come to its end
 A prophecy not a curse

Bika

Gravity in the Hole

Holes and faded letters
in my Bible
and floods of tears
on my handkerchief
Grave mud on my pick
and shining shovel
Weeds and reptiles
in my backyard
Smoke in my chimney
and black pots
full of flies
and starving cockroaches
as lean as my children.
Stinging wires on my bed
and bugs fat
like factory boss.

Nhlanhla Maake

Reluctant Neighbour

When the reign of the prison warden's lease
expires he will forsake the transparent doors
with a bleeding heart.

The jingle of the rustling chains and keys
will be a phantom cry of the past.

He is my neighbour in prison
and he walks the corridors with borrowed comfort.

When we like neighbours forsake our
dwelling place I'll write
a testimonial for him and tell
about his iron discipline.

Nhlanhla Maake

When They Come Back

When they come back
From call-up
Our sons look strange
Empty mouths without words
Deep eyes, gashes
Deepened by bayonets of fear
Puffing nostrils puffing out
Impacts of close shaves
And when they smile
They smile the smile
Of the army
When it is not armed

These children look strange
Trailed by an odour
An odour of the army

Julius Chingono

A Song of Africanisation

I'd like to trace my progress from my background: liberal, classic;
I used to read Houghton, now I read Legassick.

My journey from the truths we've learnt by rote;
I used to be a Prog, now I don't vote.

I've broadened my concerns beyond the shrinking rand;
I used to dig the Stones, now I'm into Brand.

I've adopted a new theory, a new set of beliefs;
I used to root for Chelsea, now I back the Chiefs.

I'm now of this continent, a native, an insider;
I used to write for Contrast, now it's for Staffrider.

My theories have brought understanding of our paralysis;
I used to look at race, now I'm sold on class analysis.

But all I've learnt is that I really cannot fit;
I used to think I'd stay, now I'm about to split.

Paul Benjamin

zimbabwe on the horizon

in the
rising episode
of hope
in the hope
of deliverance
uncelebrated though
the uhuru songs
the uhuru dances
(songs might have
been sweeter and more
poetic in the bush with
nature, birds)
emerging slowly
in the masses
of perseverance
africa on the eve
of another soul-search
the times
the pressures
treading on
the calamitous deaths
that doomed cultures
the ravages
the strange
estrangements
and while peace glows
for motherland
in the wilderness
it is bitter
to reminisce
the battles
of zimbabwe

Chirwa P. Chipeya

to the ancestors

your dawn-fertilised words
like semen
fall lightly
on some inner veld in me
softly
i spread out
gently
curl up into the sun
then
warmdarkly
fold in in me
the delicate beginnings
of something
that will live
and move
with quiet gentleness
in the harsh
neon eye of the world

Charles Mungoshi

burning log

i am
a burning log
my history being reduced
to ashes
what i remember
of yesterday
is the ashy taste
of defeat
my hope
for tomorrow
is the fire

Charles Mungoshi

we have heard the blues*in memoriam: Bra Zakes Nkosi*

when victor madoda ndlazilwane
and themba koyane
disappeared with the ancestral clouds
we counted you amongst those who would keep our throats wet
with the blues from the clouds of this african continent
our hearts could not stop whimpering for you to come and solace
our stomach from colonial masturbation
we all cried and said
come sing the blues with us
come blow the ghetto blues
with the children of shaka's blood
come blow the isandlwana blues
with the dispossessed
come sing the liberation blues with us
we the dispossessed have
had enough of the hallelujah blues
we have heard the alexandra blues
we have heard the blues
of man-lives-no-more when the clock of
darkness strikes
and the msomi gangsters become the ruling party
in search of bread
those were the ghetto blues
we have heard the blues
today
yesterday
day before yesterday
and days before some of us were born
we have heard the kofifi blues
 sobukwe blues
 boogie woogie blues
 marabi blues
 mandela blues
 harlem blues
 and b.c. blues
we have heard the sharpeville blues
we have heard the diagonal street blues
we have heard the hector peterson blues
we have heard the blues
sung by soweto students

overclouded by smoke fumes
from burnt government offices
we have heard the park station blues
 kempton park blues
 pelican blues
 jabulani blues
 orlando blues
 moroka blues
 soekmekaar blues
 silverton blues
we have heard the booyens blues
through the RPG sound track
which has zimbabwe liberation on record
we heard about the bra zakes blues
when some people were moaning about jesus christ blues
oh what a good friday to sing the bra zakes blues

Matsemela Manaka



Charles Nkosi *Resurrection (Defeat on the Cross)*

Our Immortal Mother

My mother died a servant
She was buried a meid
A house meid she was
Like a dienskneg she lived
With all humanity removed

On a plank bed she slept
Supported by four Gokoks
Wrapped in a shoal of bags
Covered with rags from her Missies
Radiance of colour and design faded

She scrubbed the floors
Washed their underwear
Like a soulless brute she worked
She had no soul they said
Was she not born to suffer?

She ate out of a broken plate
Drank from a cup without handle
Those were oorskiets and krummels
From her divine master's table
Were they not destined to be Masters?

My armsalige Moeder
Sy was te goed om te lewe
Te eerlik vir die wêreld
Mag die Almagtige haar seën
Haar trane, haar bloed lewe

Like a servant she was rewarded
With ou klere and huisraad
She had a Sunday off
To pray and thank their God
For their godheid and genade

They killed her
She died in solitude
Broken – broken to the bone

Without raising an eye to heaven
For the foreign God betrayed her

She lives on in her shrine
Her soul they could not destroy
She went to rest, a goddess,
Worshipped by those she loved
Immortalised by her children

Molahlehi wa Mmutle

Nowhere to Hide

Girl wake up,
The morning sun has caught us napping.
We came out here, sneaking to this place last night
To quench our desires – and it was wrong, we both knew.
He was out of town, you said,
Visiting his old folks down in Giyane.
We could not go to your home
'Cause the curious eyes of your neighbourhood would spy on us,
Neither could we go sneaking into my bungalow:
Jabu, Ntombi, Siphon and Zodwa would see us.
It is wrong, they all know.
Wake up girl,
The little birds are singing up in the trees,
The morning sun has caught us napping
And we have nowhere to hide.
The world is waiting outside.

Thabo Mooko

Cut

He tossed me bad dreams
at the breakfast table
gifts from his private nights
notes from the underground

His honesty was of a devious kind

I shared the images
the severed wrists
the tapping of the stick
the leaking roof
the dance upon the hill

Terror was close at hand
darkened the sun
put purple in the night
Sometimes
from the corner of my eye
in the corner of the room
I briefly saw
the movement of his monsters

That way lay madness

I cut the jungle vines
the umbilical cords
the tangled thread
the pack
the marriage vows

I cut
and cut again

Heather Bailey

Night Falls

I've heard the cry of bullets
from the dum-dums of Sharpeville
to the rumoured nuclear blasts of Namibia
sounds of old men who groan of wasted time
moans from widowed mothers
wails of betrothed sweethearts
children orphaned by stubborn arrogance
I've heard them all
as time ticked away
my voice tells the man
let's talk
let's talk
before the big shit starts to shoot rounds
louder than the cries
at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange
for the gold scramble
is a hustler's game
there's big shit coming man
so big daddy
there'll be no time to scuttle to Jan Smuts
listen man
listen man
bullets can turn to water
like Makana said the other day
especially as night falls
it did over Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe

Sipho Sepamla

The Revolution of the Aged

my voice is the measure of my life
it cannot travel far now,
small mounds of earth already bead my open grave,
so come close
 lest you miss the dream.

grey hair has placed on my brow
the verdict of wisdom
and the skin-folds of age
bear tales wooled in the truth of proverbs:
if you cannot master the wind,
flow with it
letting know all the time that you are resisting.

that is how i have lived
quietly
swallowing both the fresh and foul
from the mouth of my masters;
yet i watched and listened.

i have listened too
to the condemnations of the young
who burned with scorn
 loaded with revolutionary maxims
 hot for quick results.

they did not know
that their anger
was born in the meekness
with which i whipped myself:
it is a blind progeny
that acts without indebtedness to the past.

listen now,
the dream:
i was playing music on my flute
when a man came and asked to see my flute
and i gave it to him,
but he took my flute and walked away.

i followed this man, asking for my flute;
he would not give it back to me.
how i planted vegetables in his garden!
 cooked his food!
how i cleaned his house!
how i washed his clothes
 and polished his shoes!
but he would not give me back my flute,
yet in my humiliation
i felt the growth of strength in me
for i had a goal
as firm as life is endless,
while he lived in the darkness of his wrong

now he has grown hollow from the grin of his cruelty
he hisses death through my flute
which has grown heavy, too heavy
for his withered hands,
and now i should smite him:
in my hand is the weapon of youth.

do not eat an unripe apple
its bitterness is a tingling knife.
suffer yourself to wait
and the ripeness will come
and the apple will fall down at your feet.

now is the time
 pluck the apple
and feed the future with its ripeness

Njabulo Ndebele

Am I a South African Poet?

Talk is made in the small shop
almost devoid of stock
This gentleman is a South African poet
Breytenbach's name invoked
a compatriot in jail

do I, too, want liberation?

A cloudburst over Paris wets the Seine
sends the hunchback on a straight line
for cover into the nave
of that city's particular ambience

He has a book
out in the world

I consider my arms in the light
of the load suddenly lifted
from me / my body
is light now as all that
took place once with vengeance
becomes The Book

Introduced to an American sculptor
who holds a wet loaf
spits into an ashtray with decorum
I am expected to strike
the right note of encouragement

Why not Art?
why not Talk of Art?
I who am a vagrant
but with clean nails
come with a wide eye
from the veld

Needless to say
I have no experience of salons
where expatriate Americans unburden their sagas

in the Miller tradition
I ask myself: why don't they try Pretoria?

For I am a South African poet
suckled in the high-rise ghetto delicatessens
of Sea Point
narrowed in the Auschwitz by my mother's extremity
there is no doubt that I can indeed
recall my nanny's name

And I am as yet in that jail
with no Boland to spring in my cell
the jailer deeply tanned
by the sediments of Afrika
the inevitable storm which clears the heat
breaking at this moment
over the Seine and not
over the pitched mass of the paraffin clouds
of Soweto

Allan Kolski Horwitz

Song of the Falling Towers

I place my watch on the river crossings
I roam the night
With spirits of the dead and the living
At the fords
The night sings a blue song
You should have heard it
When it stole our cries
As we looked to the threatening sky
Sweeping for a reconciliation
Gathering for the dead manana

Oh, the night
Comes a-running
Singing its blue song
The song of the falling towers.

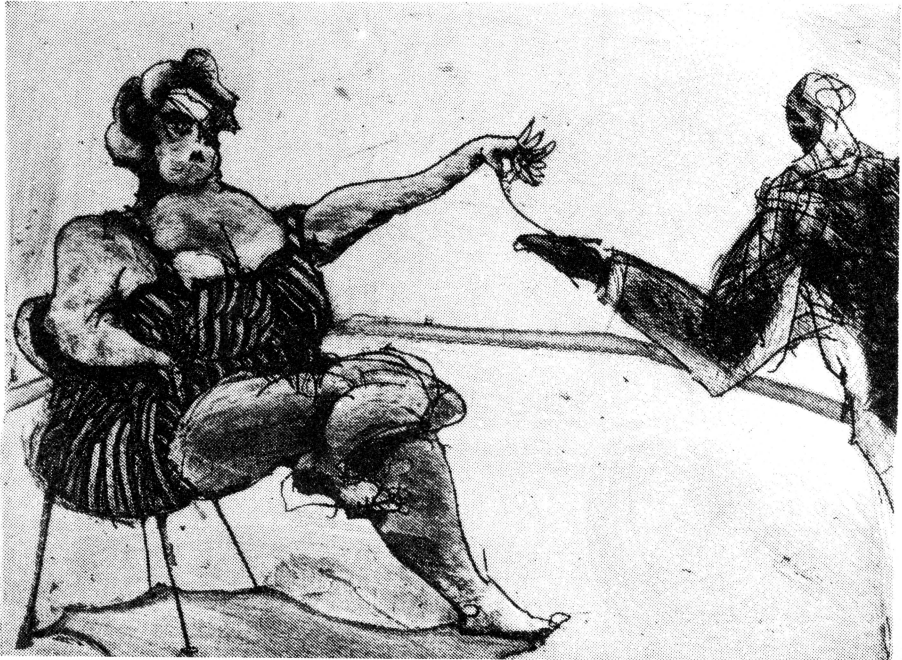
Senzo Malinga



Bongiwe Dhlomo *Babel's Tower*



William Kentridge *Black Annunciation*



William Kentridge *Domestic Scene*

Khumbula My Child

Department was its name
Abantu its targets
eStande was the place
Khumbula my child
That's where you were born

iKhaya lakho eSkom
That side of the Pimville cross
Department came with caterpillars
And said he was the boss
Khumbula my child
That's where you were born

Masimong a matalana
It was ha-Mmamokoto
Re hlophilwe ke mekotoyi
Ntja di bitswa bo gcoka sihambe
Khumbula my child
That's where you were born

Ekhaya – suka maphepha
Kliptown Chiawelo Midway Lenz
Platform one and two
Ngena naye – Phuma naye
Khumbula my child
That's where you were born

Bashonile abay'akhile
O Dunjwa no Lebona
Kanye no Skota
Basa phila abay'diliza
O mlungu no baas
Khumbula my child
That's where you were born

Ingoapele Madingoane

At the Country Club

In the foyer a sugar baron's rifles rust,
they've not been pulled through in years.
In the bar, bottle tops shower the wooden slats
which save the floor, hiding slopped beers
and totwash sluiced away. Two cricket bats
in the umbrella stand unpeel the smell of linseed.
In the lavatory someone is hawking phlegm.
A planter declares the Zulu a broken nation.
Rumour has it there are some so rich
they allow the air-conditioning to breathe for them
and employ servants merely for observation.
Cane is cropped and squeezed twice a year
and the clubhouse finds itself in new, naked country
under the millstack smoking burnt sugar.
Then tours go out to the site of the severed finger
and the places where the mamba were.
This week's tennis prize is a personalised Luger.
On the court, young men sweat through a needle match.
The umpire licks or counts his fingers and shares
their mounting love with wives who do not watch.
Water sprinklers circle with utter confidence.
In the laundry the steam iron hisses like a train
across the chairman's aubergine safari suit.
Beneath the trees which hide the security fence
nannies doze among children who pick at their
soft black undersides as if they were fallen fruit.

Christopher Hope

Do Not Ask Me

Do not ask me, mother, if they're gone
I fear to tell you
they left in the middle of the night
turned their backs on the warmth of the hearth
and for the last time
heard the home rooster crowing

Do not ask me, mother, where they went
Tracks on watery dew-bells
as puny feet brushed the morning grass
have evaporated in the heat of the sun's kindness
and the hunting bloody-snouted hounds
have lost the trail

But to you I will whisper:
Look where the willows weep
The willows of the Mohokare River
have seen the forbidden sight
tiny feet in a mad choreographer's dance
from shore to shore
wading on the sandy bed
And the waters washed and levelled up the sands
Nor will the willows point their drooping limbs
to say where they've gone

Do not ask me, mother, why they left
Need I tell you
They took the amasi bird out of the forbidden pot
and bade it fill their clay-bowls to the very brim
they'd been so hungry
so long

Then an army with giant boots
came towering over them
Brand new guns
made to silence little children who cry
glinting in the African sun
The gun-toters threw the amasi bird
back into the pot

and wrote on it with the government's ink
For white children only
and henceforth it was guarded night and day
by one hundred bayoneted soldiers

And the children raised their fists
and shouted:
Amasi! Amasi! We demand the amasi bird!
Amandla! Amandla! Ngawethu!

Now they've been gathered up
in the wings of the Giant Bird
to the place of circumcision
far, far away

And the village waits
for the day of their return
to conquer

Daniel P. Kunene



Percy Sedumedi *Market Days*

Bezuidenhout

We rose.
The orderly pulled him to his feet.
The judge had said
'no extenuating circumstances' and 'no alternative'.
The sentence was read.
The boy's eyes sped
from judge to orderly
to his mother
in the gallery.

His brother had taken his bicycle
without his permission.
He had run down the dusty location road,
and stabbed him dead.

Now his body was jerking.
The orderly closed in.
The judge left the court
quite white in the face.
It had taken him two days
to understand the story
because they were country coloureds
and spoke Afrikaans differently
and witnesses contradicted each other.

His mother
leant over the gallery
and asked, 'Wat makeer?'
The orderly walked past,
drew his finger across his throat,
and said, 'Hy kry die tou.'

She rose,
silent and slowly it seemed,
her arms reaching out
in tattered coat sleeves,
threw her head back and screamed
NEE, NEE, HY'S MY KIND, MY LAASTE KIND.
EK HET NIE MEER KINDERS NIE!

Her husband stopped twisting his hat
and dragged her out of court.

I used her words to start my newspaper report.
But now, eight years later, when I remember it,
I think above all of
not a terrified jerking face
not a scarecrow mother crucified
but of the orderly, Bezuidenhout,
dragging his finger across his own throat.

Damian Ruth

Our School

Our school is in a field.
That is no good.
We lived in the world: it was a long walk
Back to the school they have given us
In a field. The field is muddy, and stinks.

True, there are many things you can learn in a field.
Useful things. They tell us every day.
They are right. Many useful things.
About nature, and the eternal truths
That grow in fields.
In a field there is no pride, no sin, no lust for the unnatural.
Only natural growth, the evolutionary cycle of heat and cold
And drought and storm damage.
Of this earth we are born, in this earth we must grub and grapple
Till we crumble back into it.
There are many things you can learn in a field.
New things. In the field our empty bellies realised what the world contained
That the field didn't.
And we learnt how little our minds liked
The natural cycle of the field. Drought and storms
And endless scratching at the soil are all right for earthworms.
We are not earthworms.
Anyway, the field is muddy, and stinks. That's why they gave it to us.

We burnt the school.
We left the debris of the worms in the field.
We are coming back into the world. Make room for us.
We belong here.

Karen Press

Friend, Ah You Have Changed!

A river never flows back into its source

Ah, friend you have changed; neckless,
your smile is so plastic
your cheeks are blown-out balloons
and your once accordion ribs
are now drowned under mountains of fat;
your belly is a river in flood threatening your head,
your woollen three-piece exaggerates the cold.

Prisoner behind high concrete walls
wearing transparent crowns of broken glass,
guarded by sharp-toothed bulldogs
whose barks pierce the spines of passers-by
and spiked gates standing firmly vigilant
as you entertain company with imported spirits
bought with the people's tax money,
discussing your mischiefs, rallies where you fed
your audiences on false promises.

I am still where you left me, strapped ever to my hoe
in the dust, my fingers clutching the discarded rosary
praying for rain to grow enough for the Party,
put Boyi in school and pay the soaring hospital bills
while the priest claims his half for God Almighty
sending the eternal fire raging through my mind.

Though I am pushed near the edge
of your skyscraping platform to touch your shoe for salvation
you do not see me, your eyes rivetted on imaginary
enemies whom you vanquish with our chorus strung together.
The picture men will not notice me buried in this crowd
and the papers will print your shout clearly into news.

Ah friend, how you have changed,
you will never flow back here.

Frank Chipasula

The Answer

Not in the sky
where birds flap their wings in ecstasy,
singing the sweet melody of their taste of life;
Not in the sea
where the carapace of the fish desalts the mighty waters;
Not in dreams
where ancestors vigilantly hold their reign
But in the thought of a brain,
the nourishment of flesh and soul;
the seed of heroism and victory;
lies the answer.

Not beyond the horizon
where the sky falls into eternity;
Not on the escarpment
where rainwater flows back to the sea;
Not at the sea-level
where water and air constantly meet
But in the mind,
the palace of conquest and existence;
the very reservoir of might and will;
lies the answer.

Not in the shed blood of a sacrificial lamb
drunk by the dark soil at the last bleat;
Not in prison cells
where men buzz off their thought of manhood;
Not in the grave
where ghosts and night creatures refuse to rest
as maggots feed on flesh to clean the bone;
But in the tintinnabulations of the heart
as the fresh gush of blood sends away
ripples of hope for peace throughout the veins.
There the answer is buried.

Joseph Moladira

Except in Poems I Won't Look Back

Iron railway sleepers still support
the narrow bridge where trolls must have lived.
Easter Island faces, five a side,
stare sightlessly through years that unfix
me from this place, remind me of fears
I felt as a child for these haunters
of dreams. I used to hop that gauntlet
like a goat. Even now, with bristly
chin, and you at my side, the old fit
nudges my belly.

Not much remains
of the strips, but middle-mannetje
is pushing out thorn after thorn. We
did not go immediately to
the house. I showed you the foundations
of the store where we had swopped our coins
for sugar-sticks and sherbet. I showed
you the pile of bricks where the Meyers
used to live; I pointed out the less
bushy patch of ground which supported
the Van Deventers, their twenty-one
alsations, countless ducks, a houseboy
called Dicky, the finest naartjie tree
in Colleen Bawn, and red hollyhocks —
darker than blood.

Our turn-off was choked
with snake-apple bushes. At the gate-
post you took your second photograph.
The click was picked up by a thousand
christmas beetles. With ringing ears we
inspected those remains of my child-
hood. Pioneer bush blocked the front
entrance. The roof was gone. We tiptoed
over rubble to the lounge. Above
the brick mantelpiece where our Laughing
Cavalier used to hang, just there,
the crude charcoal drawing of a child.

Her hair fell straight to the shoulders. She was standing naked, pulling open her vagina. 'I want you Couplet Jim,' said a bubble from her mouth. We held hands. The other walls were covered in Zanu slogans and genitalia — in the style of Couplet Jim. Penises like adders, vaginas like holes in the ground. Forward with the struggle. Pamberi. Pamberi.

We retreated through the kitchen window into the back yard. I forgot to point out our cricket pitch, or the place where my mother used to hang the washing, though I had an image of my father's trousers: upside-down and inside-out, with clicking buttons in the wind. It was there we found two empty jars of moisturising cream. I thought then of my mother's flowers. She loved petunias, and they flourished in that sunny place where the soil was full of bitter lime. She planted 'Rosy Morn' and 'Rose o' Day'. She had 'multifloras', 'grandifloras', and variegated types, like 'Butterscotch' and 'Cherry Pie'.

Gently

you tugged my sleeve and guided me away from that place. I didn't look back. I won't look back except in poems. And that night when I woke up shouting that the faces were pursuing me, you held me tightly and said, 'It's all right; it's over now.'

John Eppel

Song of the Unemployed

This room with its brooding coal stove
And aluminium pots, unnerves me.
The broom standing in the corner,
And the black coat hanging from the wall,
Have something strange about them.
What's in the cupboard below the window?

I stand in the doorway or look from the window
And see a grey dustbin
At the hingeless gate.
An aloe with spear shaped leaves
Catches my eye:
What does it want to say?

Later today, I will take a plastic bucket
And fetch water
From a tap down the street.
I will step around puddles
And avoid hungry looking dogs.
Where do all the emaciated animals come from?

At dusk when the first trains pull up
I will stoke the fire,
Cook a huge pot of porridge,
Some vegetables
And a small portion of meat. Then
I will wait for my wife and children to return from work.

Andries W. Oliphant

On Women's Day

You are the mother of songs who bore me
In the beginning.
I read in your black terrestrial
And magical hands
The immensity of giving your life
To kitchen floors and wash-days.

You are the mother of dances and happiness.
Your face
Is the silent
Biography of daily suffering.
You are the generous lover
The mother of rivers, trees and stones.

You are the mother of all earthly and
Heavenly things. The
Point of reference,
The origin of all man.
You are the worker, comrade and goddess.

You are the mother of grain,
The antelope
And other animals.
I've been with you in broken villages,
In dead forests
We gathered twigs for fire.

You are the mother of towns, aircraft and cities.
I squat with you
On street corners
To sell boiled eggs and mealies.
You are the source of fish, peanut-bread and meat.
I've been with you on the rough ride in the kwela-kwela.

You are the mother of songs, since the beginning you have
Borne all man.
In your black hands
I discern the choreography of mysterious stars.
At your call
The earth will rise
To restore you as the mother of all things.

Andries W. Oliphant

Hour of Decision

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

Dikobe Martins

Fire in Bonteheuwel on 17 June 1980

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

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

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

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

and blood.

This is the fire that has triggered nerves
in the streets that map the land,
burning at every street lamp,
bristling at every fireplace.

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

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

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

They'll swallow them like breakfast
crisp as the morning news
bright in primary reds,
blacks and whites,

hardened, everyone
is being hardened
by this fire that has warmed and killed
bodies and fighters in tonight's brightness.

Donald Parenzee



Sam Nhlengetwa *My Strange Dream*

There is a river in me

There is a mouth opened in me, a river
it flows down from my throat to the ground
through streams more liquid than water.

As I walk past the people passing in the rain,
this river, which is not mine,
flows into theirs.

It travels to some through the waves of air,
to some through the painful way they walk,
to some through the long bible of their thinking,

even the man who swings onto the bus
as it moves away. The township hisses,
it's a ribbon of smoke now.

There's a river in me, and it's not mine,
it was shown to me by a teacher of rivers,
and it flows and flows with its kirlian fire

then it falls and joins with others in their stream.
I am disappointed in people, but I love them more
and my hand is open at the place of the rivermouth.

Robert Berold

Dissolutions

Today I read entrails: the morning is terse and full
as a surgeon's hands on a bloodstained smock.

Outside, a pigeon's tedious chuckle
falls into colons,
into the acrid smell of ink.

'A message from time
in an elephant skull:
it mutters about Africa
where the wind chips at
its vitreous china.'

My animal spirits, too,
are garrulous,
they speak out of turn.
Winged fragments of bread and wine
blur past my window.

'They had much to do with the hippos,
the kudu, the lion, the quaint yellow men.'

*

'The growth began slowly — a vegetable
patch —
a fort, hovels and farms, Company offices.

Lichening well beyond their basin,
the buildings began to gel
like the shell of a hermit
crab or a mussel,
a muscular resistance to the surf of time.'

Yet the rooted brain is benign;
it sees no harm. It insists,
there must be truth in pain
and health in this sagacious meat.
Yet I am vicious with time
and so wait on salvation,

saying I am bread and wine,
though converted by my own mass.

‘Emerged from the past,
they accepted deposits
of brick, stone, mortar.’

In my mind there is only slow eruption:
lymph and oil, water, corruption.
Bursting like this against the skin,
I feel new knowledge crawling in
like poplars hissing drily
in a black wind.

*

Straddling my garden wall,
this morning glory is all that violence desires:
quivering green, and veins,
and strangling faces.

‘Cancerous city! stretched
upon a mountain’s paws, houses grin-
ning like a cadaver’s teeth!
‘I hear their slow grind-
ing down,
the thud and tumble
of their accretion into monumental stone.

‘As we drive to work,
this poison mist
gives us empty vision of the East:
cornblue
ochre
and a sulphur sun
that the black trees break.’

Ken Barris

this city

there is a moment
in this city
when the eyes of the city
are closed
and the mountain's body sleeps —
even the newspaper boys
are curled under their light coverings
in corners
like caterpillars in dried leaf cocoons
waiting to emerge
with newsprint wings
and the city waits to dream...

there is a moment in this city
when the city lies defenceless
as a sleeping child
that can't be harmed —
a moment between the breath in
and the breath out —
a moment in this city
of my waiting breathless heart

Elizabeth Villet

Een Maandag Aand

Ek loop toe nou die aand vir ou Swanie in Nuweland raak waar
Tafelberg oor ons waak.

'Fok my! Wat het van jou geword!'

God. Wat hét van ons geword?

Ons is toe daar in by die New Sportsman, ou Swanie soos 'n óú
bekende die deur in. Hy lag en gooi 'n vet arm om my skouer.

'Fok my! Jy lyk nie 'n dag ouer!'

Ek sê ons moet loop, sy vrou wag.

'Fok haar!' sê hy, en gee 'n bitter lag.

Maar dit was toe al waaroor hy wou praat, oor hierdie
lewensmaat.

Hy het later begin kak soek, sommer op almal gevloek, en toe
gooi die barman ons daar uit.

'Fok jou!' skreeu hy, en breek 'n ruit.

Hy moer toe 'n poliesman neer, plat op die teer. Toe loop staan
hy in die middel van die straat en pis, reg voor 'n Tramways bus. Ek
slinger daar weg, ek onthou nie waar, ek voel sleg en ek voel naar.
Ek het later loop lê in my kar en huil soos 'n kind, en daar het
iemand my die volgende dag gevind.

Die son was al hoog, die dag aan die gang. Ek het wild om my
gekyk, skuldig en bang. En daar waar ou Swanie dood is, het mense
geklim in 'n Tramways bus.

Mario Maccani

Jack

The man
 who died last night
 would not want to be remembered
 by name.

Remember Looksmart — he would say —
 he was murdered in the struggle.
 Remember Mini
 he was hanged in the struggle.
 Remember Nelson
 he has given his life to the struggle.

The man
 who died last night
 would not want to be remembered
 for his part in the struggle
 not for the secret sacrifices
 not the unknown raids
 the silent contributions
 not for any of the necessary schlectering
 not even
 for the time of trial
 and the twelve years
 twelve years in prison
 the price of principle.
 Cheap at the price, he would say.

The man who died last night
 would not want to be remembered
 as hero.
 Can a hero cry — he would say —
 scream in the night
 cold nights of fear
 scream, question, doubt, dig, delve?
 Patched humanity
 stripped, laid bare
 a little bit of man, is man
 he would say
 stunned in the face of

what he would call
private failure.

The man
who died last night in London
would not want to be remembered
an exile from home.

Home

was Cape Town
home was the beach
the sun
the sun which shines on everybody
— he would say with a smile —
nature's simplicity
home was the camaraderie
rugby
carnival
struggle
home had a taste of salt
biting, strong, demanding
home is where we'll be, he would say,
when we can call it
home.

The man
who died last night
would be amused to be remembered
a writer
who could breathe laughter into life
with just a touch of tragedy
pinpointing priorities
pillorying the pompous
silencing the strident, shattering shibboleths
always, painfully, seeking perfection
truth encapsulated in four lines of doggerel.

The man
who died last night
you should remember
spent twelve years of his life
in prison
a necessary contribution
he would say.
But remember
twelve very long years
ill sick falling asleep sick

alone in a cell sick
heart attack sick
not allowed remission sick
twelve years sick.

And when he had finished the twelve years
they banned him, restricted him,
alone again sick
young, as he would say, at heart
but confined in an old man's body
struggling on with an old man's heart

which burst.

The man
who died last night
would not want to be remembered
by name.

His name was Jack.

Hugh Lewin

* Jack Tarshish, a leading member of the Congress of Democrats in the early 'sixties, received a twelve-year sentence in 1963, at a time when the political community 'inside' was still very small and the going correspondingly tough. Tarshish was in bad health throughout his sentence, suffering from narcolepsy, a complaint which brings on sleep without warning.

He made several fruitless attempts, while inside, to become married to Gillian Jewel, with whom he had a relationship at the time of his arrest. Often detained, she later left South Africa and lived in London until her death by suicide.

Towards the end of his imprisonment Tarshish suffered the first of a series of heart attacks. When he was released in 1975 he was placed under a restriction order which confined him to Cape Town. A heart operation at Groote Schuur hospital did not improve his condition.

In 1976 he was permitted to leave South Africa and lived with his sister in London until his death at the end of the 'seventies.

Jazz

(Based on an instruction to German dance bands, 1940)

1

Pieces in so-called foxtrot rhythm
(so-called swing) are not to exceed
20% of the repertoires
of light orchestras and dance bands:

2

in this so-called
jazz type repertoire,
PREFERENCE is to be
 given
to composition in a major key
and to lyrics expressing
 joy
in life
rather than Jewishly lyrics
 gloomy

3

as/to tempo
?
preference is also to be given to brisk
compositions
over
slow
ones (so-called BLUES)

however the pace (you break my heart)
must not exceed (when you're away)
a certain degree (my man has gone)
of allegro (won't come back till day)

commensurate

with the Aryan sense of
discipline/& modera-
tion.

(wa wa)

On no account will NEGROID excesses in tempo
so-calledhotjazzorinsoloperformanceso-calledbreaksbe

allowed.

4

so-called jazz compositions

'may'
contain
at most 10% s

yn

co

pa

ti

o

n

the remainder must consist of
a n a t u r a l l e g a t o m o v e m e n t a
devoid of the hysterical rhythmic *versal s*
characteristic
of the music of barbarian races
and cond-u.

cive

to DARK instincts ooo

alien aaa

to the GERMAN PEOPLE

5

strictly prohibited (don't forget, now, baby)
is the use of instruments
alien to the German spirit
i.e. so-called saxophones of all keys
as well as mutes

which turn the noble sound of WIND (?)

and brass instruments

into a Jewish-Freemasonic yowl

(you got that, cat)

so-called wa wa and hat.

6

also prohibited are
so-called drum/
breaks
longer than//
half /^a beat /ⁱⁿ four
quarter beat
e/x/c/e/p/t/i/n//s//t/y/l//i/z/e//d
mili (beedobee) tary MAR!/che/S
//////////!

7

The Double-
Bass must be played solely
(yeh)
with the so-called
bow
in so-called jazz and other syncopations

8

plucking of the strings
is prohibited
since it is damaging
to the instrument
and detrimental to
Aryan musicality

9

musicians are
likewise
forbidden to make vocal
improvisations (so-called scat)

10

skoo-bee-doo!

Kelwyn Sole

Pregnancy

*'A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit*

*Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb*

*...A poem should not mean
but be.'*

Archibald MacLeish believes
a poem should not mean
but be (as a dumb fruit,
I think he said)

but sometimes I think
a poem must be mean
to be intelligible

here.
For instance
my wife seems to be pregnant,
expanding parcel of flesh
in which the bomb of the future
kicks its tiny feet

(I write this down to form it:
anneal to husband and poet
in the cosy mansion of the poem
when the outside world is too cold
or hectic to love her in.)

But today war has descended on us
suddenly and finally.
Tongues lash out at enemies,
the radios one can buy
goosestep as soon as plugged
their collective noise popping
my speech's flimsy bubble.

From this poem

the news is I am warm,
and sit in front of a veering fire
which used to be
my house

while words' meanings tick in my throat,
nervously.

Kelwyn Sole

Untitled

another just-too-short weekend draws to a close
while
another much-too-long week looms ahead
and like all faithful cogs in the unstoppable machine
I will take my place.
Whenever I can
I quietly slip out
of the unstoppable machine
and lodge myself into the new one:
the one not quite complete,
the one only just starting to move,
but the one which promises, once in motion,
to not merely stop the unstoppable,
but to put it out of existence —
totally, completely, once and for all!
I feel comfortable in this new machine —
for it is not of iron and steel,
but of flesh and blood ...

Farouk Stemmet

Workers Say . . .**WORKERS SAY**

More jobs, higher wages

EMPLOYER SAY

Not now, not tomorrow
but sometime later.

EMPLOYER SAY

Overtime now, double up production

WORKERS SAY

Not today, not tomorrow
but sometime later.

'Those who can hire can fire,'
workers are told
overtime now or . . .

WORKERS SAY

Those who hire now and fire now
This they will have to know,
that we are now like ball of fire
running through drought-stricken
farms of cheap labour.
We are the sun that refuses to set
when darkness goes through
poverty pockets.

Makhulu wa Ledwaba

For Brother Andries Raditsela

Your death has come to me from hundreds of miles away
It has shocked me but did not surprise me
It has shocked the workers but did not surprise them.

I have a few words to say — my mouth is a grave
without flowers
My mouth is the empty coffin when the corpse is gone
It is like a river without water
But it has faith in your death.

If I had strength enough I would go and revenge your
blood
our blood
I would carry a bazooka and go straight for the
murderers
I would go to the murderers' concrete capitals and
shoot them
all.

Comrade, I did not come here to open the wound nor to mourn
I am here to curse the Minister of Law and Order
I am here to condemn death in detention
and I am here to say: 'Qinani basebenzi, lomthwalo unzima.'

Your blood, Andries, will not be in vain
Your blood will be a moral lesson for us to punish oppressors
treason, detention and murders
Your blood will give power to your comrades,
To the workers, to your family and to us all.

Andries asikhali ngawe ufe okwe qhawe ezandleni zamagwala.

Nise Malange

Praise Poem to Fosatu

You moving forest of Africa
When I arrived the children
Were all crying
These were the workers,
Industrial workers
Discussing the problems
That affect them in the
Industries they work for in
Africa

I saw one of them consoling others
Wiping their tears from their eyes
I saw wonders, 'cause even in his
Eyes the tears did flow.
'Worker, about what is that cry Maye?
You are crying, but who is hassling you?'
Escape into that forest,
The black forest that the employers saw and
Ran for safety
The workers saw it too
'It belongs to us,' they said
'Let us take refuge in it to be safe from
Our hunters'
Deep in the forest they hid themselves and
When they came out they were free from fear

You are the hen with wide wings
That protects its chickens.

Protect us too with those
Sacred wings of yours
That knoweth no discrimination
Protect us too so that we gain wisdom
Militant are your sons and daughters
One wonders what kind of muti
Sprinkle on us too that we take
After them and act likewise.
FOSATU has given birth
Its sons are spread all over Africa
Even overseas you find its sons:

FOSATU you are the lion
That roared at Pretoria North,
With union offices everywhere

Whilst walking,
Thinking about the workers' problems,
I saw a fist flying across Dunlop's cheek
Whilst Dunlop was still shivering,
Perhaps Bakers was asking
'What did my neighbour do
That he is being hurt like that?'
I saw a combination of fists
Bombarding Bakers on his ribs,
Until Dunlop was concerned,
He called the shop stewards and asked:
'Madoda, please tell us,
Is MAWU now going to cause trouble at Bakers?'
'No, Banumzane.'
'Who is organising at Bakers?'
'Of course Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union.'
But where does it come from?
'From FOSATU.'
'This MAWU where does it spring from?'
'Also from FOSATU.'
'Same constitution?'
'Yebo.'
Same policy, same constitution,
don't worry Jim,
It's still another MAWU.
Chakijana! Wake up and wear your clothes
Of power and wisdom

Keep your gates closed FOSATU.
Because the workers' enemies are ambushing you
They are looking for a hole to enter through
In order to disband you
Oh! We poor workers, dead we shall be
If they succeed in so doing
Close! Please close!

You are the mole that was seen by the bosses' impimpis
Coming slowly but surely towards the factories
Fast ran the impimpis
And reported to their bosses and said:
'Baas, Baas, thina bukile lomvukuzane buya losayidi
Kalofekhtri kathina.'

'Yah, yah; What is the mvukuzane my boy, tell me,
What is it?

Is it one of FOSATU's unions?

You are a good muntu

Mina bhilda wena 6 room house

Lapha lohomeland kawena.

Thatha lo-machine gun, vala logates

Skhathi wena buka lo-union

Bulala lo-union

Skhathi lo-union yena ngena lapha fekhtri kathina,

Amashares phelile

Lo-union thatha yonke.'

Whilst still wondering what to do,

There came a messenger and said:

'Better leave everything as it is,

'Cause the union is already holding a meeting with

The workers in the canteen

Not only here – there at Sasol as well.'

FOSATU, we have chosen you to lead us

Time and again we have been electing leaders,

Electing people with whom we were born and grew

Up together.

People who knew all our sufferings,

Together with whom we were enslaved.

We had elected them because we believed they were

A lamp to brighten our way to freedom

But to our dismay,

After we had appointed them, we placed them on the

Top of the mountain,

And they turned against us.

They brought impimpis into our midst to inflict

Sufferings upon us.

Some of us, those who were clever, were shot down

To the dust with bullets

Others were shut behind the walls of darkness

Others opted for fleeing the land of their birth

Is FOSATU also going to hug you with those warm
Hands?

His hands that know no racism?

Prayed we did to our Mvelinqangi and the

Ancestors have answered us,

And sent to us FOSATU!

Don't disappoint us FOSATU,

Don't sacrifice us to our adversaries,

To date your policy and your sons are commendable,
We don't know what's to happen tomorrow.

Listen I am a Sangoma,
You have come to me so that I tell all about you
I have thrown my bones and called on my abalozi.
My bones and my abalozi are telling me this:
Yebo, you have good and handsome sons
Also they are intelligent and quite healthy.

Good Mnumzane, I am writing you a letter to ask
Permission to use this ground.
We will be discussing and reporting to our members
About all that we have achieved.
Here is the agenda so that you may know about
What we are going to discuss.
There you are big man, your refusal is a challenge.
Get hold of him and pull him by the jacket.
Put him into the judgement box.
Come Senior Judge
Judge against him for refusing us permission to use
This ground.
Why do you refuse us permission to use
this playground?
The old man said this and that and he was left
Disappointed because the judge granted permission
Don't play with fire, my friend because
You'll get burnt.

You are the metal locomotive that moves on top
Of other metals
The metal that doesn't bend that was sent to the
Engineers but they couldn't bend it.

Teach us FOSATU about the past organisations
Before we came.
Tell us about their mistakes so that we may not
Fall foul of such mistakes.
Our hopes lie with you, the Sambane that digs
Holes and sleeps in them, whereas others dig
Holes and leave them.
I say this because you teach a worker to know
What his duties are in his organisation,
And what he is in the community
Lead us FOSATU to where we are eager to go.
Even in parliament you shall be our representative

Go and represent us because you are our Moses –
Through your leadership we shall reach our Canaan.
They call you the disruptionist because you
Disrupted the employers at their own meeting.
Because you man of old, asked a question:

'Did you consider the workers?
Have you really planned about FOSATU,
The workers' representative?
No!
Well then we can't continue because FOSATU doesn't
Laugh when they see something that makes workers
Look laughable.'
The meeting was disrupted
All that remained behind was beers, whiskeys, and
Disappointment.
The cakes and the cool-drinks were also disappointed.
Hero deal with them and throw them into the Red Sea.
Strangle them and don't let loose.
Until they tell the truth as to why they suck the
Workers' blood.

I am coming slowly and I am watching all that you are
Doing.
You're great FOSATU.
Bayethe!
Amandla kubasebenzi!

Alfred Qabula

The Black Mamba Rises

The victors of wars
But then retreat
The Builders of nests,
But then like an ant-eater
You then desert.
Heavy are your blows,
They leave the employers
Unnerved

On your side are your
Brothers even at the new
Jerusalem
Let it be workers! They say,
The heaven above also
Approves.

Ngudungudu, the woman
Who married without any
Lobolo,
Busy boiling foreigners'
Pots
Yet yours are lying cold.

The humble bride,
Affianced without the
Bridegroom's consent
Yet others are affianced
With their father's consent,
Even the Japanese have now
Come to be your bridegrooms,
So! Bride why are you entwined by
chains,
Instead of being entwined
With gold and silver like the others?

The Black mamba that shelters in the
songs
Yet others shelter in the trees!

Ancestors of Africa rejoice,
Here are the workers coming like a
flock of
Locusts,
On rising it was multi-headed,
One of its heads was at Mobeni,
Njakazi, the green calf of
MAWU can bear me out
Another of its heads was at baQulusi
Land at Ladysmith,
On rising it was burning like fire

Even Sikhumba – the leather that
Overcomes the tanners,
Sikhumba who knows no race
Who stabs an old man and
A young man alike,
Using the same spear
Who stabs a man's bone,
Inflicting pain in the heart

But he is now showing a
Change of heart
Here is the struggle,
Sikhumba and Mgonothi are
mesmerised,
Asking what species of old mamba is
this?
Dying and resurrecting like
A dangabane flower.
It was stabbed good and proper
during the
Day,
At Sydney Road right on the
premises,
To the delight of the impimpis,
And the delight of the police
There were echoes of approval there
on the

TV at Auckland Park saying:
 Never again shall it move,
 Never again shall it revive
 Never again shall it return
 Yet it was beginning to tower with
 rage.

The old mamba that woke up early in
 the
 Morning at St Anthony's
 Let's sit down and talk, he
 Now says
 The spear that thundered at
 Dawn at St Anthony's,
 The spear that devoured the father
 and the sons
 And the daughters
 Then the men came together,
 Devouring them whilst singing
 Yet the songs were just a decoy.

Rife are the rumours
 That those who defied the
 Unity have sunk,
 To the throbbing hearts of the
 Employers

You black buffalo
 Black yet with tasty meat,
 The buffalo that turns the
 Foreigners' language into
 Confusion,
 Today you're called a Bantu,
 Tomorrow you're called a
 Communist,
 Sometimes you're called a Native.
 Today again you're called a
 foreigner,
 Today again you're called a
 Terrorist,
 Sometimes you're called a Plural,
 Sometimes you're called an
 Urban PURS

You powerful black buffalo,
 Powerful with slippery body
 The buffalo that pushed men

Into the forest
 In bewilderment the police
 Stood with their mouths open

Rife are the rumours
 That those who defied
 Being pushed into the forest
 In exile they are,
 One Smit is in exile across
 At the Bluff,
 One Madinana is in exile across
 The Umgeni river,
 Both can bear me out.

Praise poets, messengers,
 Observers,
 Run in all directions,
 Stand on top of the mountains,
 Report to Botha at Pretoria,
 Report to our heroes on the
 Island,
 Report to the angels in your
 Prayers,
 Say unto them – here is a
 Flood of workers,
 The employers have done what
 Ought not to be.

Why tease the mamba in its
 Century old sleep?
 The writing is on the wall,
 No stone shall stand on top
 Of the other till eternity,
 Tell them – the borrowed
 Must be given back
 Tell them – the chained
 Must be chained no more
 Tell them – these are the
 Dictates of the black mamba,
 The mamba that knows no
 Colour,
 Tell them – these are the
 Workers' demands,
 By virtue of their birthright

Dunlop workers I'm taking
My hat off,
I'm bowing to you with
Respect.

Mi Hlatshwayo



Charles Nkosi *Pain on the Cross*

In These Days

How often are we to arrive
in a different country
having set out
in all good faith
to find the climate much the same
and the people unsettled.

How often to know
the sadness of harbours
or cities' late streets
or to find an address
in an unexpected quarter
which we must have known.

But this is not a place
we would call home.
Just as others, fleeing a war
stare from ship's rail
as new land
fills the horizon and dread
their coming, so we too
fear that hope may desert us.

All about is the destruction
of houses. Fires flare
on mountains, towns are
lost beneath mud.
In these days everyone is an enemy,
rumours disguise the spy
to put off the chaos,
stop preparations for the worst.

I cannot forget that coast:
the boulders heaped into the sea,
the perfect day broken
by distant gunfire
of naval manoeuvres.
All know it. All know
the carefully plotted campaign,

the organised fear
that strikes at the heart.

But you must know that love
asks more than occasional moments,
more than a smile of complicity
and a reassuring touch
in the quiet night:
demands violence and pain,
a street fight and a child's death,
if we are to find a country
waiting, peaceful, ours.

Mike Nicol



Mpathi Gocini African Wedding

Sacrilege

King death and the law
have built themselves
special highways
to the cemeteries
every weekend

Tearsmoke
rubberbullets
or actual bullets
depending on emotions
or orders of the day

Where will we belch the pain
now
after burying our dead

Cemeteries
have long been
the only residues
of privacy
where we can
shed oceans and sigh

Lancelot Maseko

Renegade Blues

Seeing that most of us live day by day
and only a few impala-leapers
hurl themselves across weeks and months
across borders, fences, roads and seas
across drought and across hunger
from the one past to the multiple future...

what can we say, we pedestrians
stuck into the ground like thornbushes
eyed-out by these people and their cattle
too dumb to order ourselves a drink
too paralysed to know fear

a gun in trained hands is knowledge
its hinges and oily places intimate as a lover,
but now we must fight with bare-hands
against the monstrous spectacle of wasted time

Reading the newspapers we hardly even
look between the lines,
what happened to the times when our talking made sense
each newly lit conversation making ash out of the enemy,
and what happened to our leaders,
and what happened to our friends

hard men have taken over,
we are no longer consulted —
or hard women for all we know,
for we know nothing anymore
except this purple night and beyond it
the rotting pumpkin of our spirit

that chair, plastic and empty,
these cigarettes, those glasses, that brooding waiter,
all these things make us suspect each other
we feel it like the damp sweat running down our backs
one of us will soon be turning traitor
leaving us here alone

and joining the movement.

Patrick Fitzgerald

Crossing the Desert

This is the landscape of prophecy the ancient Namib
tilted sand from the mountains desert upon desert
from Okahandja Okazize Wilhelmstal Karibib

the N71 where the squat graves of the Mahareros assert
the honour of rebellion by a deep dry riverbed
where the municipal pool's wired in on blue alert

where towering koppies named for kaisers long dead
helmeted in ironstone clad in the yellow braid of acacia
commemorate colonial massacres and the railhead

the low of cattle now the meat-rack of Namibia
this is carcase land where blood is cheaper than rain
turning west we travel through rocks like a brazier

the tyres fry on the tar the highway leads where they came
there are crows which mean carrion bugs on the windshield
we are warned of kudu vaulting from Francoisfontein

over the foot-and-mouth fence the embankment the four-wheeled
vehicle like a capsule comfortable against the descent
down an escarpment hiding nothing all revealed

but once the marble hills fade the bushes relent
and only stones flower and the grasses thin
into the rubble of eternity piled and spent

there is Usakos corrugated white and buckled tin
and Ebony Arandis Rössing where the sky's red
Spitzkuppe to steer by on the planet's rim

at 80 kms an hour there I lifted my eyes from the dead
world into the next world saw instead of tortured lava flows
new courses geysers wells channels a fountainhead

there where we have been eroded and worn destroyed arose
exactly what mad visionaries see in the wilderness
a celestial city welcoming wide wondrous I suppose

by definition it must contain all qualities we in our viciousness
can never maintain floating as in a dream
caressed with the perfect hand of gentleness

I gather it held all knowledge all peace everything supreme
in short no armaments no sirens no hatred no police
it was the only place I knew where things were what they seem

I call upon Doris Lessing St John William Blake Nongqawuse
even without God they're all the same these heavenly projections
seen by prophets disgusted with the long tyranny of woes

when will this empire fall at last release subjection
when in the name of those who first challenged the status quo
did humankind first conjure this alternative perfection?

turning left a few degrees we go where we have to go
a Coke sign a palm-tree the sea-breeze rolling down mist
and in Swakopmund we find a tourist bungalow

tonight we swim in the sea drink beer get pissed
Eve they say rose from Adam's rib Christ from a herder's crib
we have crossed the desert to pink dunes foggy damp and blessed.

Stephen Gray



Gamakhulu Diniso *What about Us?*

Johannesburg 100

The big city
whose streets are lined with gold
celebrates a hundred years

Hot'omnyama celebrate
ululate and rejoice

celebrate a hundred years
of subordination

celebrate a hundred years
of oppression
 repression
and more oppression

celebrate a hundred years
in injustice
not to mention the exploitation

you thankless
agitator
instigator
intimidator

you communist
you klipgooier

Leave your Molotov cocktail
at home and
join in the tikkie draai

celebrate. don't you realise
baas likes you
there's drinks and wors
but don't forget the curfew

celebrate Mnt'omnyama, celebrate
the big city comes of age
forget your dark cold home
in Soweto
you are lucky to have one anyway

Jabulani
Jubilate
Mlungu loves you

Remember when Paul Kruger
gave you the Bible
nevermind that he stole your land
in the process

Remember when Smuts
drew the human rights bill
for the international community
certainly you don't need one too

Remember when Verwoerd
so unselfishly designed
an education system specially
for you

Remember how well you were protected
from the communists
by J.B.
Jimmy Kruger
and them

Remember you can sleep peacefully
the trouble-makers are all
on Robben I. pleasure resort
in Pollsmoor
Diepkloof Sun

You still want cause to celebrate?

Mkhulu came to Jo'burg in his youth
he gave his all to this glorious city
now he is finished
he exits with nothing in his pockets
sorry! he doesn't have pockets

Celebrate mntanami celebrate
what little you earn
from this city you have to return to it
don't engage in consumer boycotts
Mlungu will not be pleased

Have more wyn en wors
 and wait for the third Rubic...
 eat and be merry
 forget the country bums
 in Moutse, Siyabuswa
 forget Khayelitsha, Leandra
 forget Wilgespruit, Ekangala
 forget Crossroads

Remember you won't have to
 carry a big pass anymore
 just a card
 but you have to carry it
 all the time

 This is Reality
 12-year-old refused bail
 what's he doing in jail in the first place
 12-year-old on a charge of intimidation!

Yes, you heard right ... intimidation
 This is Reality

Aag man celebrate
 forget polotiks

Did you know
 Rau celebrates twenty years?
 Ja the universiteit
 not the tribal college

the under-graduates spend
 one year in the townships
 practising marksmanship
 then off to Angola
 to protect you

You've got no worries
 celebrate

CELEBRATE OR ELSE...

Chipane L. Kgaphola

Essays

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THOUGHTS ON BONGIWE AND THE ROLE OF REVOLUTIONARY ART

Thamsanqa Mnyele

Bongiwe Dhlomo's exhibition at the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery brought to my mind the fact that there is a new art growing in South Africa. It is an historical event in our art that the social climate has developed to the point where it has given birth to a woman artist who can look so directly at the situation around her. Surrounded by Bongiwe's work, I could not help but go back and reflect on the growth of art within South African society.

How can any graphic artist make public observations and suggestions on the state of the visual arts at home? The act of doing so carries with it the risk of implicating that artist as spokesman; an idealistic, perhaps arrogant exercise. On the other hand I find it equally dangerous that we should carry on the worn out culture of resignation when major decisions are made over our work, indeed over our lives as a people. While this paper is far from representative, nevertheless I think it is necessary that certain things be said by the visual artist in South Africa. Failure to do so implies grave ignorance of those things which make or, possibly, even break our lives as a people.

I have often been asked why, in South Africa, when whole communities are threatened with extinction by a soaring cost of living; when whole communities suffer dismemberment through forced removals; when the majority of the people are declared foreigners in the country of their birth; when people are crudely and ruthlessly suppressed through rushed pieces of legislation, detentions, the massacre of workers and students; when, therefore, whole communities resist this genocide through organising themselves into civic organisations, trade unions, women's and student organisations, there has been disturbingly little visual art output in the country and abroad which is organically related to these community efforts. Nor has there been a groundedly political voice from this quarter, let alone a broad art movement with an obvious national commitment. Such is the extent of the concern.

It is my contention that the prolonged strife and struggle that manifest themselves in cultural work, namely in the visual arts, can be traced to the root of the national political situation. Any understanding of the

development of visual imagery must, therefore, recognise this. That principle which governs traditional art is still valid today; i.e. that art must have a function: a walking song, the sculpture that serves as a chair, the majestically decorated houses of the Ndebele-speaking communities. The subject matter is drawn from the actual activities of the people in their living surroundings, the source and supreme function of art. We may go further and say that the actual act of creating the visual imagery is informed by the community and nourished by it, consciously or unconsciously, and that it is the community which will or must act as audience. Again we can take the risk of stating that the skills of execution, the intimate workings of individual imagination etc. cannot exist outside human experience, in this case the community.

In contrast the development or underdevelopment of visual art in South Africa in this century, was shaped by the factors that wield political power. With effective employment of capital and other means such as high technology and skilled manpower, the state of the arts was determined and controlled. Art galleries, churches and schools all formed and added the processing machinery, the finishing touch.

Most indigenous artists in South Africa seldom managed to acquire formal education beyond secondary school. And to compound the problem no formal educational institution ran an arts course, at least for Africans; hence the responsibility was taken over by foreign mission stations. It is important to point this out in order to understand the workings of the system at an intellectual level. Fort Hare only introduced the art curriculum in the middle seventies, and the course is at degree level. This means that even a highly talented person cannot be enrolled without a matriculation certificate. I am not sure if the situation has changed. Other schools like Endaleni in Natal, offer a course but don't go beyond the level of crafts and handwork as teaching aids. Mission art schools offered courses but confined themselves to the various art techniques and European art history thus carefully avoiding state confrontation.

The art that sprang from this experience was seldom carried beyond biblical themes, African landscapes, wildlife, myths and legends. No exploration of the immediate social political phenomena. Where an artist dared attempt to reflect a political theme, treatment of this issue lacked depth of involvement. The work seemed rushed and lacked conviction. Sometimes this type of work seemed too self-involved and was devoid of that outward thrust; it lacked an upright posture, an elevated head, a firm

neck, and a tight muscle. To put it another way: the images were totally abstracted without an obvious course, distortion of the limbs was acute. The subject matter was mystified and to this extent the work lost integration with real things in our life; the work sagged under a heavy veil of mysteriousness. Perhaps this is the essence of the work. The disappointing fact about this approach to art is that the picture is deprived of that essential dynamic element: immediacy of communication with the community, the natural makers and consumers of art.

Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that the artist had begun to look for a different audience, in the galleries and the critics who asked for 'strange African art'. It is at this stage that the political motives (or clarity) of the artist are brought into sharp focus: his class interests as opposed to those of the people. As Dikobe wa Mogale once said, 'Art is not neutral.'

The elements of distortion, mystification, abstraction, are not negative in themselves and can be put to positive and effective use, as in the indigenous idiom. This calls for maturity of temperament, clearer social awareness and skill of the working hand. In my opinion we have not been successful enough in maintaining control over any of these facilities. The same goes for the elements of anguish, pity, shock and surprise.

With developments at home today, the country is obviously in grave need of a new calibre of cultural worker, notably in the visual arts and song. The kind we have now has yielded too willingly to the dictates of negation. We must now create this new man and woman whose visuals and songs will be informed by the most pressing needs and demands of their time, place and circumstances: they ought to be articulate but simple so as to be accountable to their work and with clear political insight, a skilled hand and firm revolutionary sentiment.

With the absence of this calibre of workers amongst us, is it any wonder then that no collective spirit, no singlemindedness of purpose, no solid, patriotic, consistent art movement has taken root among our struggling people? Is it any wonder that no union of the visual arts is forthcoming in our country? Is there any wonder that the exhibition of committed art that was being organised by *Staffrider* failed to take place due to the absence of work in this direction (see *Staffrider*, Vol. 3, No. 4)? Is it any wonder that the art collective in Katlehong received Piet Koornhof and other government ministers as guests during their exhibitions? Finally and most crucially, is it any wonder that the house of the leader of the art collective was petrol-bombed by the disgusted

community of Katlehong (see *Rand Daily Mail Extra*, 5 October, 1984)?

But there have been exceptions, those workers who suffer constant state harassment, detention, exile, death, and madness. These artists deserve our political support and respect. I must take the risk and include names at random: Dikobe wa Mogale, Gavin Jantjies, Lionel Davis, Peter Clarke, Gamakhulu Diniso, Manfred Zylla, Bongiwe Dhlomo and others. The ones listed here vary broadly both in terms of community involvement in their work and general political activity. But disturbingly, it is idiosyncratic of our artists that when they develop political consciousness they automatically desert the art profession for 'something more practical and real', as one put it.

This analysis is filled with shortcomings, but it is understandable. Dikobe, Gavin and Bongi, like all artists today, have been taught to work too much as individuals, away from the collective. This must be resisted. The system of fragmentation, the tendency towards individualism, exclusiveness and isolation is as moribund as that of divide and rule.

In contrast, there are just the beginnings of a new approach to art growing at home. As the grassroots organisations gain in strength, some artists are finding a new home for themselves and their work. Mpumalanga Arts Project, Community Arts Project, the Johannesburg Silkscreen Workshop etc. We are beginning to see banners, posters, and graphics in the trade unions, civics, women's organisations, the UDF. These graphics are the birth of a new culture, conceived in the hopes and aspirations of the community, nourished by the people's organisation.

Dikobe was one of the first graphic artists to actively respond to the demands of his country, and in taking appropriate action met with the heavy hand of the state. Dikobe was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for military attempts to overthrow the racist state.

Before his arrest he stated with clarity and typical articulateness the shortcomings of the present state of art and appealed for the collective creation of the new cadre. Allow me to express my respect for this man. Allow me to express revolutionary anger at those whose racist deeds are depicted in the work of Bongiwe: forced removals, insensitive resettlement. We hail the fighting communities that inspire Bongiwe's work.

To Bongi herself I must point out though that her pictures need more concentrated working. They deal with serious issues that affect our lives, but this is done somewhat half-heartedly, for example the rubbish bin and the figure next to it (an old woman?) are mere shapes, dead images.

There's no feeling of corrugated iron, no wetness, no stench. The work seems extremely hurried and can easily degenerate into the realm of trite and defeatist 'township art'.

But make no mistake, Bongiwe is a committed artist. In South Africa, where women are doubly oppressed, it takes courage for a female visual artist to emerge and assert herself as she has done.

There are certainly ways of improving our work, of destroying the negative image. We must change our understanding of the profession. We must read, study, travel, and practise the profession in community development projects. We must learn to open ourselves to popular opinion, take criticism and do practical organisational work within the arts. We must convene and attend seminars and workshops whether or not they are within our profession. These are the things which inform and nourish our artwork. Our destinies are determined by them. It is our duty to make available our services as cultural workers as well as members of the community of the liberation struggle.

Finally we must consider adopting the graphic technique in our work for its scope and elasticity in regard to the particular nature and size of the developments in our country. We should also utilise fully the scientific means available to develop the graphic image of our country. These include the camera, printing press etc. These have to be conquered and tamed to suit our needs and social climate.

Apartheid is huge and ruthless. We must employ equally huge graphic methods to complement the efforts of our people; work big in size and concept, organise around unsentimental principles. There can never be artistic freedom or freedom of expression for a people in captivity. This is enough on which to base our cultural work and organisation. To create paintings and songs of revolutionary optimism and unity between the old and the young, men and women and whole communities.

Let us dip our brushes into bold colours of painting and confidence and let us daub our walls with murals, posters, writings, cartoons, all soaked in the conscious language of revolution. We must restore dignity to the visual arts. The writing is on the wall.

The thoughts in this paper are hurried. The problems that beset my country may deem this the green idealism of a slave. But to reach out and grasp this vision is our task and our joy, both as cultural workers and as members of our communities.

Forward with the creation of a new calibre of cultural worker! This was the call made at the gathering on Art Towards Social Development

and Culture and Resistance in Botswana in 1982. And in the areas where the people have become actively critical of their enemies, such as in the Vaal, Soweto, Katlehong, Tembisa, Grahamstown, the demands made upon us as cultural workers cannot be more clear.

Our people have taken to the streets in the greatest possible expression of hope and anger, of conscious understanding and unflinching commitment. This calls for what all progressive art should be — realist, incisive, and honest.



Bongivi Dhlomo *Ebony Statues*

BLACK WRITERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Jaki Seroke speaks to **Miriam Tlali**, **Sipho Sepamla** and **Mothobi Mutloatse** after a steering committee meeting of the African Writers' Association at Khotso House in 1981.

SIPHO: I have a very strange history in the sphere of writing. Although I lived through the period of the Sixties I really wasn't part of the writing scene. I knew about *Classic* for instance. I knew about the writings of the Mphahleles, the Motjuwadis, Casey Motsisis and the others. But like I say, it was from a distance. I was too much involved with firstly the academic world of teaching. For me, at that time, your Wordsworth and Shakespeare were the things that I was involved in. And later on when I worked at the Union Artists I got involved in playwriting. There was *King Kong*. There was *Sponono*. These were the things that had central influence in the black literary world. There was also of course Gibson Kente. These were the things I was involved in. Much later, I think as a result of working at the Union Artists, I became involved with writing itself, taking an interest in the writings of Can Themba and others.

It is true that one was not hit by the writings of local people at that time because the Sixties are noted for the demise of writing locally; the government having introduced the Publications Act, as you may remember, in 1963. This wiped out the works of many local writers. Whoever was interested in local writing found that there was a vacuum. We found ourselves working through this vacuum and we had to look outside South Africa. Our point of departure was a very difficult one.

It was towards the end of the Sixties that suddenly the liberals, in particular, took an interest in Oswald Mtshali's writings, leading to the appearance early in the Seventies of his *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, followed later by Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo*. That opened possibilities that were remote in the Sixties. The white publisher was becoming interested in works by black writers. It was not until Wally and Oswald were published that we realised this possibility. I don't remember any work being published during the Sixties.

JAKI: What happened to the efforts of Nat Nakasa, who published *Classic* magazine? After he took an exit permit it appears that the liberals took hold of the reins of black writing. Is it the vacuum of the Sixties

that brought this situation about? Oswald Mtshali's book, for instance, had a suburban orientation.

MOTHOBI: It just happened to have found a ready market, the liberals. It was an unfortunate way to have emerged. He was almost put on a pedestal — then there was no follow-up. (*Fireflames* by Oswald Mtshali was published and banned in 1980.) There was the obvious reaction. The difference that also arose between him and Mongane Serote was one of those unfortunate things. Some of the academics made a big story out of that.

There was this big gap between the days of Nat Nakasa and those of Oswald Mtshali. I would say the departure of *Classic* was also caused by different editors. It was the *Classic* of Nat Nakasa. When he left the image was not the same.

SIPHO: Nat left in about '64 or '65. Barney Simon took it over but the very fact that he was white and *Classic* had been started by a black man meant that there would be a difference in tone, for instance.

I think we must not forget that it was inevitable that Mtshali would be picked up by the liberals. Unfortunately black people had not yet found it necessary to spend time on literature. Literature was still a thing for the academics. The public did not buy books so it meant black writing would be propped up by white people. It was discouraging. You depend on your homeground people to thrive. This continues to be a problem, to start with, for black writers.

JAKI: In the early Seventies black poets withdrew from a poetry reading at Wits University. You were invited to read too, bra Siphon. What was the stand taken?

SIPHO: Oh yes, there was a programme called 'Black Thoughts'. I must be quite honest, that took me by surprise. I live in Benoni and I had not been involved in the discussions that might have taken place behind the scenes. Don Mattera was not yet banned then, and he and I tried to persuade the young chaps to read their works, but they just walked away. They felt strongly against whites being there. This whole thing was unfortunate in that here we were in a white institution all the way from the townships. Whom did we expect to be in the audience other than a mixed group? That's why I thought it was unfortunate for them to walk out at that stage when it was quite clear all along that there would be white faces. In any case there's never been a programme like that one organised by Wits University since then.

MOTHOBI: Another aspect that we should mention is the black press.

The black press of that period did not promote black literature. For instance they could have taken up *Classic* and asked questions, or sort of generated some readership interest. It just happened that *Classic* was read by serious-minded people; most of them white. One aspect that is disturbing is that even up to today the black press seems not to have found its cultural base. It is still mostly conceived on the western concept of viewing our life.

SIPHO: I think you are right to say that the so-called black press hasn't committed itself to the advancement of creative writing by blacks in this country. They come onto the scene, it seems, by accident. When, for instance, a book has been brought out.

MOTHOBI: They should not only concern themselves with *our* works, there is also the whole black diaspora. People would like to know what is happening in, say, Swaziland. Perhaps the press is condoning the implication that we are part of Europe, not of Africa. This can be corrected through the media, so that at least the local people can wake up. It is not healthy when we see a political happening here in isolation from the rest of Africa, just a South African thing. That's not true.

JAKI: Mthobi, what you are saying could be misconstrued. Most of the early black writers started in journalism before turning to creative writing. We'll create a problem if we are going to draw a line between the journalists and creative writers.

MOTHOBI: In fact all of our pioneers had some stint in journalism. But today it seems the trend is reversed. I don't know whether it's a misunderstanding, or what. We seem not to be together in the whole thing. The journalists are one side and the creative writers the other side. The press seems not interested in what our literature is all about. People do not understand the road we are taking. They look at literature in isolation rather than as part of the whole political picture. No one acknowledges the fact that creative writing has made greater strides than black journalism over the past ten years.

Most of the press is so sweeping in its criticism of the new wave of black writing. They say it is too obviously political; it cannot offer anything else. We see the new writing as part of what is happening. It is a type of writing that is perfectly suited to the times. We need a writing that records exactly the situation we live in, and any type of writing which ignores the urgency of political events will be irrelevant.

JAKI: We are tackling a crucial question when we talk about critics. An argument has been advanced that because of the scarcity of qualified

people, blacks who are well versed in the theory of literature, the standard of black criticism does not rise. Inevitably the role of midwife is played by people with foreign concepts.

MIRIAM: This is very interesting. These so-called critics labour under a misconception in that they say that in order to write you have to be a literary scholar. I don't believe in that sort of thing. It reminds me of people who accuse us of being, just as you say, too political. To speak about the matters just as they are instead of building them into the emotions of the reader. As if it's just reporting. I know. I have been accused of that. What I believe in is that we can never be writers unless we reflect the true position of what is taking place and try to carry the reader along with us.

A critic once said black South African writers write as though Dostoyevsky and Kafka had never lived. But these are Russian writers, Czechoslovakian writers, you see.

Also, the novel has changed. It is not what it used to be. We no longer want to copy Dostoyevsky and them. I think these arguments are silly. I don't agree with that at all. Why should we adhere to these self-professed critics of literature? Why are we tied up by the role the critics assign to us? It is the reader who must judge, not those masters of literature.

Writing is an art like all the other forms and it should not be pipelined or squeezed in a watertight channel. A student of literature, who is also an aspiring writer, should learn from books as much as possible. But in exercising his creative vision he should be free to acquire his knowledge, not only to imitate, but to innovate, to divert or dissent from accepted tradition. His way should be open to unknown spheres and set the pace of advancement. That is what I believe creativity is. We must continue to explore and never forget our main task of being engaged in a psychological battle for the minds of the people.

The System. It took years for the System to create the conditions that influence the minds of the people. It will take time too for the writer to reverse these conditions. Not only for those who write, but taking the people along with us. If we write for ourselves that won't help. We shouldn't be trapped like the 1950s generation of writers who had their books read by a few at the top of the masses.

(If there was a gap in the Fifties between the writers and the masses, there's also a gap now between the writers of the present and the experience of the past. The panel members had a lot to say on this theme of continuity.)

MOTHOBI: We can recapture the past with some of the people who lived through those days.

SIPHO: Whatever critics say they must take cognisance of the historical perspective that is governing the present-day writer. It is important to be aware that the present-day writer comes almost from nowhere. Your Dostoyevsky, your Kafka are people we are not exposed to. And again it should be borne in mind that writing relates to tradition. You just don't write from nowhere. If you do, you've got to set your own standards and that's not easy. This is why we have problems today because we have been forced to set our own standards. We are, at the same time, not saying we are not going to look at the things that went on before us. On the whole, whether we like it or not, we've got to find our own ground. We grow, we grapple.

MOTHOBI: We would like to determine our future concerning what is happening here. Not what America or others are saying about our books. It's a new language that we are creating.

SIPHO: It should be borne in mind that there is an audience for us. But it is also our task to challenge that audience to read. You cannot make people read if you do not relate to their world. We are creating an audience for ourselves. Those who come after us will look at other qualities of writing which we've ignored.

MIRIAM: It is said that *Amandla* is not a novel but a statement. I wonder what a novel is. In my writings I never try to copy somebody or adopt principles set down by scholars. I have read quite a lot of literature. I have always remarked that I'd like to present my stories with the black audience in mind and I have never really intended to write for a white audience. I don't think it's important at this point. I don't think I could have taken to writing if it was not my desire to take part in the process of change in this country.

MOTHOBI: Concerning black writers here, the Ugandan writer Peter Nazareth has said, 'It is fashionable to criticise South African writing because it is too obsessed with apartheid. But in South Africa the source of the faults that make the social system unjust is the all pervasive force of apartheid.' Here is an outsider who understands the situation here.

Writers in outside countries are reviewed by other writers. Alex Haley's *Roots* was reviewed by James Baldwin. That's a compliment! We should make a stipulation: we would like to be reviewed by our peers!

SIPHO: Ja, you know, I must say we are full of self-hate as black people in this country. Instead of encouraging a person who is making an

attempt we try to destroy this person. What we hope to gain mystifies me. There is nothing that a so-called critic will gain by destroying this book. Instead he will prevent the black people from making any progress. It is from his beginnings — humble as they are, poor as they are — that a lot can come out. It is really disturbing and very unfortunate that some of these critics are BC adherents. It appears they have not understood the meaning of black consciousness. We have to go to the people, like Miriam says. It is the man in the street — how he understands BC — that I feel we must listen to, rather than people who'll come with the jargon that they've picked up from American magazines to tell us what BC is all about. Whereas in their daily lives they don't know what it means.

MOTHOBI: We are not working in a vacuum. We have the people to respond to.

JAKI: 'Mama', regarding the position of a black woman who has to look after the household, run errands and several other things, how do you suppose time could be allocated for creativity in that situation?

MIRIAM: Ja, well. I just had to reconcile myself to the conditions already made. To do everything: be a mother, a wife and all else together. I had to do these things. I felt I couldn't write until I had done these, you see. I must say, it is quite a task to write. In the first place you have to be fortunate enough to have education which can enable you to express yourself. Think of a girl who was born round about 1957 who is confronted with Bantu Education as soon as she is a grown person. This makes it impossible for her to perceive and express herself. Some of them have the feeling but lack the ability to do so. I must say I was fortunate to have been born at a time when most of these restrictive measures imposed by Bantu Education did not yet exist. We had 'native education' then.

I have tried to bring young women writers together. I offered my house as a meeting place. You find that they have all the willingness to try and write but they are not able to do it because of these impediments.

MOTHOBI: 'Mama', it is not insurmountable. It needs dedication. Those who have shown willingness should be encouraged to improve.

MIRIAM: Ja, but you've got to read in order to write, Mothobi. The women are subjected to tedious tasks, confined to the kitchen. You've got to outgrow that. I had to outgrow the tendency to clean, clean, clean all the time. These meagre tasks — men are not exposed to them. Even your way of thinking as a black woman is confined. As soon as you wake up, you think of the broom. A man only thinks of getting up and going to

see his friend or perhaps even reading. I had to break from such traditions and even educate my husband.

MOTHOBI: Ja, the black man has to realise that he is not the greater partner. He has to acknowledge the talent that is coming out from the other partner. The kitchen syndrome is not the sole domain of the woman. Nature doesn't always work it out so that the brains are always among men in the family. Some of the inhibitions the potential black woman writer has are man-made, literally.

MIRIAM: I am fortunate. My husband has this about him. He will read a book. If it is very interesting, he'll pass it on to me. We will also talk about it.

There are men, for instance, who have stopped me from delivering *Staffrider Series* books to their wives. They say they don't want their wives to be reading books. 'Why should my wife read books?' Honestly, this is true. Many women steal moments to read.

Mpikayipheli Figlan
The Barrier



CAN THE WRITER BECOME THE STORYTELLER?

A Critique of the Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba

Michael Vaughan

Matshoba's stories were first published in *Staffrider*. Some of them were then collected into a single volume, *Call Me Not a Man*, published in the soft-cover format of the *Staffrider Series*, in 1979. This volume has subsequently been banned (for distribution, though not for possession)¹ in South Africa. African literature is regarded by the agents of cultural control as being a potentially volatile and dangerous cultural area. The stance and subject-matter of Matshoba's stories are certainly much closer to immediate questions of social practice, in the modern urban-industrial context.

I shall begin with a brief summary of Matshoba's subject-matter. The first story in the volume, *My Friend, the Outcast*, concerns a family who are thrown out of their rented home in Mzimhlope (a township of Soweto) for alleged non-payment of rent. This, however, is a fabrication used by officials of WRAB (West Rand Administration Board) in order to find accommodation for those who are prepared to pay a bribe. When the petty-bourgeois individual who got the family's home in this way turns up, and finds the people outside the house with their belongings (a scene he'd never visualised), he refuses to take the house.

The title story, *Call Me Not a Man*, concerns the role of African police reservists in the townships. They use their authority as minor agents of state repression to extract what is essentially a *personal fine* from workers homebound with their weekend pay-packets (for alleged non-possession of passes, etc.). The title derives from the humiliation of having to look on while these things happen: of having no means of effective self-assertion.

A Glimpse of Slavery is about farm labour. Protagonist-Matshoba is sentenced to a prison term for squaring up against a white individual at his place of employment. Such short-term prisoners can be sent out to remote farms to work off their sentence. The story describes conditions on such a farm.

A Son of the First Generation concerns a young man whose lover and bride-to-be gives birth to a ... *coloured* child! The story goes into the circumstances of this liaison, and ends with an open statement of African solidarity with 'coloureds'.

A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana describes a journey across South Africa, from Mzimhlope to Robben Island, on the part of protagonist-Matshoba, in order to visit a close relation in prison there as a political offender. The story focuses upon the place Robben Island has in African consciousness.

Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion describes another journey, this time to the Transkei, by train and by bus — just to see what the 'homelands' really add up to. Protagonist-Matshoba visits some petty-bourgeois acquaintances in the capital, Umtata, whose style of life turns out to be vapid and parasitic. His real interest is only aroused when he is in the company of the migrant workers, moving between the mines and the homelands in an endless, compelled cycle.

The final story, *Behind the Veil of Complacency*, focuses upon the lyricism of a relationship between two young lovers, rudely shattered when the young man is accused of stealing an orange by a white shopkeeper.

The theme reflected in the title of this critique derives from an essay by Walter Benjamin. There is a contradiction between producing for a *public*, and assuming a relation of participatory immediacy with a *community* (that is, adopting the role of the storyteller). However, Benjamin's theme of the opposition in social role between the *novelist* and the *storyteller* is highly suggestive about the literary project in which Matshoba is engaged.

To begin with, I shall concentrate upon the most striking features of Matshoba's break with the aesthetics of liberalism, in his concern to produce a fiction closely in touch with popular experience.

In the first place, the short story form is worth commenting on. Of course, in comparison with the novel, it is brief, pithy, immediate: it requires a relatively small space of privacy. Matshoba uses the form to convey the pressured, disputed space of intersubjective life. At the same time, he develops the theme of the *traveller*, which both maintains the momentum of pressurised, impelled subjectivity (stories are overheard on crowded commuter trains), and evokes the motif of reflection upon experience, of disengagement from the immediate (looking out of a window upon the world in which one is usually immersed).

Secondly, the whole liberal preoccupation with the individual interiority, and hence with subtle and elaborate characterisation, is dispensed with. Characterisation establishes individual specificity and separateness, a function which is not relevant to Matshoba's project. Rather than character, Matshoba concentrates upon *situation*. Each story has an *exemplary* quality: it treats the situation that is its subject-matter as a model situation, from which a lesson can be derived.

The illusion-creating fictional narrative is shallow, and not allowed to develop the semblance of autonomy. It is constantly punctuated by a non-fictional narrative voice, a voice of social and historical analysis, of practical advice, of counsel. Matshoba adopts the narrative role of the friend, the sharer of experience. In formal terms, the space between fiction and actuality is abbreviated.

The theme of *counsel* is prominent in the stories. The prominence of this theme is related to Matshoba's concern with the exemplary or model-like character of the story situation. A situation is exemplary when it reflects an aspect of common experience: counsel derives from interchange based on mutuality of experience:

Roughly, here is the story of my friend. Mind you, I was not there when it all started to happen, but I can imagine what took place; what with such things being part of life for us darkies. We read about them in the papers, we hear about them every other day, we come across the people who bring them about, who cause our friends pain and sorrow, many times in our lives. But when you read about it or hear about it, it is never as real as when it happens to someone who is close to you.

The stories, then, are a medium of counsel about some of the exemplary situations of township life. The theme of counsel includes the characterisation of the counsel-giving friend. The role of the friend is both necessary and impossible:

I saw it on their faces the moment my friend and his aged mother stepped out of the hall. I did not ask them anything because I wanted to save them the agony of going over the details of their disastrous meeting with the superintendent. I wished that I had not been there to share those first moments of their tragedy because it was now my responsibility to console them and I did not know what to say. I was dumbfounded and so were they. It was hard for all of us to accept that they were now homeless. We said very few words all the way from Phefeni to Mzimhlope, and Vusi's mother moaned from time to time. I hated to think that I was going to be there when they were removing their belongings from the house, actively assisting them to carry out the heartless bidding of the superintendent.

The counsel-giving friend takes on a specific phenomenal form in several of the stories: the form of the *traveller*. Indeed, Matshoba gives the whole motif of travel a central place in his fiction. The journey is an inescapable moment in the life of the African workforce, since it marks the enforced separation between the ghetto-like place of recuperation from labour, the ethnically-defined township, and the site of labour itself. Matshoba interweaves with this compulsory character of the journey, its character as a context for storytelling and counsel:

'What is it sonny?'

'A baby,' answered the one wearing a grey straw hat with a black band, and a tweed jacket with narrow lapels which was a size too big for him. He replied as from an empty and dejected soul.

'Hey, *ndoda*. What's wrong with you? Girl or boy?'

'Boy.'

The train staggered, heaved and swayed with its human load, and the hold-on straps hanging over our heads slipped in our grips as the weight of the passengers leaned heavily on us.

You might have thought that our destination was Pandemonium, capital of Blazes, and that we were fast nearing it. The way we were sweating! Streams of sweat trickled down the side of my ribs and

cascaded over my brow. Maybe it was the heat which vaporised the cheerfulness out of the young man's soul.

If we consider the significance of this collection of stories, taken as a whole rather than separately, we can see that Matshoba has given model-like prominence to a *range* of situations. The stories move between town and country, metropolis and homeland, romantic love and political repression. Matshoba is using his stories to evoke the sense of a *map* of experience. Once again, the image of the traveller is significant here, for the traveller moves between the scattered points of the map of experience: he/she is a co-ordinator, a principle of relationship and unity. The traveller, looking out upon the passing landscape and its diverse monuments to the history of the land, also serves the function of representing the (repressed) dimension of history (political consciousness). In short, Matshoba moves from the compulsory moment of travel, to its moment as an image of exploratory, co-ordinating consciousness, of critical and reflective estrangement from the impelled immediacy of local experience. Travel is, in its way, a motif of redemption.

Looking at a map enables one to understand the relation between particular features and the whole landscape. Map-making is important for orienting one's place in the broad movements of popular experience. The traveller is implicitly a map-maker:

Soweto sprawled to the horizons like a reposing giant. I could not help feeling something like awe, a clutch at the heart of my being. With due respect, the train decelerated to a crawl as it left New Canada station behind and crossed Noordgesig towards the Mlamlankunzi station, below Orlando Stadium.

'There, near the high building which is Mzimhlope station, is where I stay. This is Phomolong, beyond is Killarney. Further up is the hostel — the one that engaged in the faction of Seventy Six. The horizon is Meadowlands. The school with the green roof to the right of that ridge, is Orlando West High where the first bullet of Seventy Six snuffed out thirteen-year-old Hector Peterson's life.' I pointed it out to my companion, thinking that perhaps one day when Bantu Education and all the blackman's other ogres have been defeated I shall suggest that the school be named after Hector Peterson, for reasons well understood. My friend looked attentively at the living map I pointed at

...

Undertaking a journey is, then, for these reasons a vital motif in Matshoba's stories. The journey does not have to be a literal one: it can be an attitude of mind. In the story *A Glimpse of Slavery*, protagonist-Matshoba decides even to treat his *enforced* sojourn on a brutal prison labour farm as just such a journey. That is to say, he adopts an attitude whereby the enforced situation is treated as the occasion of an exemplary lesson in broad African experience: the lesson supplied by the conditions of rural labour.

Another motif that arises from Matshoba's concern in his stories to give expression to the popular, communal dimension of experience, rather than the individual dimension, is that of *conversation*. Conversation occupies an important place in the stories, and this place is obviously closely bound up with the themes of friendship and counsel. It also relates to map-making. Protagonist-Matshoba listens to a long conversation on his bus journey into the Transkei. This conversation takes place between returning migrant workers, with an intervention by a young woman which in itself carries an exemplary value. Indeed, the immediate subject of this conversation is sexual relations and roles. The men argue over suspicion and resentment of women, and their bondage to domestic relationships. In this way the men give immediate expression to the contradictions of their predicament as migrant workers: separated from their wives and families during the periods of contractual labour, evolving short-term relationships with other women in reaction to this separation. The men have a sense that they do not really control these intimate issues of their lives. The nature of women becomes a target for relief of frustration and humiliation. The conversation, however, incorporates experiences and perspectives that are divergent, contradictory: it is thus also a medium of counsel, of critical interchange at a spontaneous level.

So far I've tried to identify those motifs in Matshoba's fiction which reveal his concern to give expression to popular experience in his stories. Now I want to consider some of the features of these stories that seem to me to reflect limitations in Matshoba's development of this concern.

First, a broad question. How does Matshoba represent the nature and source of the exploited/oppressed condition of the vast mass of the African people? The nature of this representation is of fundamental importance, because on it depends the type of strategies that are developed in resistance to exploitation and oppression. On it depends the type of *popular consciousness* that Matshoba is concerned to develop.

This brings us back to the issue of the relative roles of race and class in the South African social formation. The question of the way exploitation and oppression in South Africa is interpreted comes down to the question whether primary stress is placed upon the role of economic factors (capitalism, class relations) or upon racial factors (white domination of blacks).

In Matshoba's stories, we find both types of explanation. Black Consciousness provides a pervasive cultural assertion in these stories. At the same time, in specific contexts an economic explanation is put forward for the basic structure of social relations, an explanation that stresses control of the means of production, separation of labour from the means of production, manipulation of the labour market to ensure a continuous excess of supply over demand, and so on. In some stories, the two types of explanation, racial and social, are placed side by side in apparently open contradiction. In *A Glimpse of Slavery*, there is a characteristic conversation between the convict workers, in which the role of the African petty-bourgeoisie is criticised. In this same story, however, in other places, social contradictions are presented as having an essentially racial dynamic. This type of explanation seems to depend ultimately upon a *human nature* problematic: racial prejudice is an expression of distorted human nature:

I saw that we would never arrive anywhere trying to pinpoint or diagnose the disease that was eating away part of our mottled human society, placed by fate in a most beautiful country to learn to appreciate it in amity, but failing to do so, to the utter dismay of the rest of humanity. 'It's just no use trying to find out these things. But at least let me give my opinion too. I think it's pride, an insane pride that makes them refuse to accept in the face of humanity that they are wrong. On the other hand it's cowardice, a fear of accepting failure and losing face. But then think of how great the man would be who would stand up and declare that they were indeed wrong.'

We are a long way, here, from the question of control over the means of production! If we were to interject this speech of protagonist-Matshoba with the question: 'Wrong about what?' — the answer would come back: 'About racial prejudice, racially discriminative laws.' A critique based on race implies a resolution of the critique in the abolition of all racial legislation. Such an abolition has tremendous implications for the sphere

of politics in South Africa (the balance of class forces), but does not tackle the more fundamental economic problems of the African working masses. A critique based on racial identity rather than social identity, while it evidently has some broad positive significance for a people suffering from general oppression, has a more conclusively satisfactory character for the petty-bourgeoisie than for the proletariat.

Of course, in his stories Matshoba is concerned with the *lived quality* of experience. The two types of explanation for exploitation and oppression offered in these stories may combine to form a contradictory dimension of this lived quality. However, there is an absence in Matshoba's presentation of this lived quality. None of the social resources rooted in the environment of urban industrial production are given real space in this presentation. The working conditions of the urban working class, and the strategies of resistance evolved in the context of these working conditions, are largely neglected. There is no emphasis upon the positive potentiality of specifically working class consciousness, or working class forms of solidarity.

In a sense, this absence is bound up with the very prominence of the role of the friend, the giver of counsel. This theme presents community solidarity in a personalised form, and in a form which is relatively abstracted from class roles in the world of production. Emphasis upon the personalised relation of the counsel-giving friend seems to go with a representation of popular consciousness as politically passive and fragmented. The active role of consciousness is only possible in a personalised mode: the friend, the traveller. Is Matshoba in this way giving expression to his own petty-bourgeois *activity* vis-à-vis working class *passivity*?

NOTE

1. *Call Me Not a Man* has since the first publication of this essay been unbanned and is available for distribution.

Sam Nhlengetwa

The Musicians



TURKISH TALES AND SOME THOUGHTS ON SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION

Njabulo S. Ndebele

As I was preparing this review of Yashar Kemal's *Anatolian Tales* (London: Writers and Readers, 1983), I realised that I was going to have to go beyond the conventional review. The subject matter of Kemal's stories and the forcefulness of his storytelling, left me thinking long and hard about his art. It dawned on me that I had before me a collection of compelling artistic statements which, at the same time, presented themselves, with an intriguing sense of inevitability, as fruitful occasions for a serious examination of key social issues affecting some rural and semi-rural communities in one 'Third World' country, Turkey. There seemed to be something disturbingly familiar about these stories; something the echoes of which edged the focus of my mind towards the South African literary situation, where it seemed there was something missing. Was there, in contemporary South African fiction, a tradition of such compelling an imaginative recreation of rural life as in Kemal's stories? I could not come up with ready examples. On the other hand, instead of showing any serious interest in rural life, our writers seemed decidedly preoccupied with urban culture. Granted that such preoccupation may be justified and valid, what, nevertheless, was the state of the resulting urban fiction itself as art? Before I address myself to the questions posed, let me describe what triggered them off in the first place.

I

Kemal's *Anatolian Tales* is a collection of stories in which we are treated to a detailed, imaginative recreation of rural life in the Anatolian plains of Turkey. It consists of four fairly long, and three very short, stories. I will summarise the long stories first.

'A Dirty Story', which opens the collection, is the story of Hollow Osman, a somewhat mentally retarded peasant who has been living with and working for Huru, a woman who has brought him up since he was a child. Osman's friends succeed in convincing him to persuade Huru to buy him a wife. After all, hasn't Osman been 'slaving' for Huru all these years, and 'living alone and sleeping in barns like a dog'? But it is not long after Osman has had a wife purchased for him that a rich landowner's son seduces her. Soon, the young men of the village are 'lining up at her door all through the night'. Osman is powerless to deal with the humiliation. Things come to a head when even vital economic activity, such as ploughing, stops, threatening the village with virtual starvation. The young men return from Osman's house in the morning to sleep, too tired to do any work. The village faces a crisis. In a plot involving the Agha (landlord) and some other people, Osman's wife is driven out of the village. But the young men pursue her to her place of refuge, where they continue to ravish her mercilessly. In the end, Osman picks her up, all but lifeless, and runs away with her.

'Drumming Out' is about Fikret Irmakli Bey, a young man recently graduated from the university, and whose first appointment is as District Commissioner in Anatolia. Learning of his appointment, all the rich farmers of the district prepare to give the new Commissioner a glorious welcome, and they provide him with the best accommodation available. The aim is to lull the young, inexperienced Commissioner into a stupor of comfort and complacency, so that he could easily issue permits for rice planting against the Rice Commission's regulations which are meant to protect public health. Bey falls into the trap, and planting permits are issued liberally. Matters come to a head when powerless villagers are flooded out of their houses. As a result, a conscience-stricken deputy Commissioner, who has been working in the district for a long time, brings the attention of the new Commissioner to the regulations. The Commissioner, to his horror, realises too late that he has been fooled. From that moment, he begins to fight against the Aghas, and goes out of his way to protect and defend the interests of the peasants. The rest of the story is about the determined efforts of the Aghas to get rid of the Commissioner, who is no longer their 'friend'. They succeed. The final ejection ceremo-

ny is the 'drumming-out' by an 'army of boys, each one holding a tin can and drumming on it with all his might'. 'It's a send off', it is explained to the departing Commissioner. 'The Aghas always do that for Government officials forced to go like you....' Thus, the Commissioner leaves, but he has won the gratitude of the peasants.

In 'The Baby', Kemal tells the story of Ismail, whose wife has just died, leaving her husband with a newly born baby. Ismail's problem is how to bring the child up in so desolate a place as his village. He also has to deal with unfounded recriminations that he contributed directly to the death of his wife. Ismail goes around trying to get the help of breast-feeding women. But only one person is willing to help: a blind woman who 'sees' more clearly than others. But her help is of no avail. There is no relief from hunger and suffering. The rest of the story is a piling up of details of Ismail's suffering.

In 'The Shopkeeper', the last of the long stories, Mehmet is a village storekeeper whose store is also some kind of village social centre. Men gather there for a chat. But always there with them is Queer Sully, a boy who always sits, absolutely silent, a few paces away from the men. Part of Mehmet's business is to obtain grain clandestinely from village women who, without the knowledge of their husbands, want to buy a few luxury items from the store. This way, Mehmet accumulates a lot of grain which will seemingly bring in a lot of money when household stocks run out. An unscrupulous businessman, Mehmet deals underhandedly with his competitors. He also arranges abductions of village girls for men in the cities. But Mehmet has to reckon with Queer Sully who has a quiet disdain for injustice. He has a history of dealing firmly with local wrong-doers; such as setting their fields on fire. Mehmet tries to ward off possible retribution by attempting to bribe Queer Sully with the bounty of the store. At the end of the story, Sully almost clears the store of goods, and then spits in Mehmet's face, for Mehmet had just arranged for the beating up of a competitor.

The next three stories are the short ones. 'White Trousers' is the story of a young apprentice who dreams of owning a pair of white trousers. He lives with his widowed mother and already shoulders the heavy responsibility of helping her in the hard task of surviving. The boy's resolve to prove himself as a worthy and deserving worker is severely tested when he is hired out to work continuously for three days at a kiln. He barely passes the test, and a fine relationship develops between him and his employer. In the manner of a rites of passage story, the boy is well on the way to being an economic asset to himself and his mother.

'On the Road' is the story of a man who returns home from the market where

he has just sold six sacks of farm produce. He is riding home on his donkey cart, and is counting his money, when he comes across a woman walking alone in the scorching sun, along the empty country road. He offers her a ride. It turns out that she is returning home after a divorce. Two lonely people meet on a lonely road. Fate brings them together for a lifelong companionship.

In 'Green Onions', Mahmud is returning home to his village after being away to make money in the cities for five years, so that he could set himself up in livestock farming. His return home by train is also his second train ride. In the compartment, he finds a young man with a sleeping, sickly woman resting her head on the young man's shoulder. She has a 'wasting disease which, according to one doctor, can be cured by the breathing of fresh air full of the smell of pine trees'. The smell of fresh onions in the compartment so reminds Mahmud of his own village that he buys fresh green onions at the next station. The green onions become a symbol of all that is wonderful in the world. Once he learns of the young woman's problem, Mahmud wants to share with the engaged couple the healing powers of the pines of his village, and its health-giving springs. There, they will find life, and the girl will be cured, and they will be married. Mahmud invites the couple to come and live with him, and will take care of them with the money he has just made, and shower them with the hospitality of his village. The couple get off at their village station and the train pulls out. As the story ends, Mahmud is yelling the name of his village from the window of the moving train, for in his excitement he had forgotten to give it to the couple.

II

A remarkable feature of Kemal as a writer in this collection, something I found refreshing, is that he emerges as a writer who is rooted firmly in the timeless tradition of storytelling. A chief characteristic of this tradition is that a story is allowed to unfold by itself with a minimum of authorial intervention through which a storyteller might directly suggest how readers or listeners should understand his story. Two key effects result from the lack of such intervention. Firstly, the entertainment value of the story is enhanced, and the emotional involvement of the reader is thus assured. Secondly, such involvement does not necessarily lead to a lulling of the reader's critical consciousness, as Brecht, the German poet and dramatist, would assert. On the contrary, the reader's emotional involvement in a well told story triggers off an imaginative participation in which the reader recreates the story in his own mind, and is thus led to draw conclusions about the meaning of the story from the engaging logic of events as they are *acted out* in the story.

Also, there is an impersonal ring to Kemal's stories, one which approximates the impersonal, communal quality of a traditional tale of unknown origins passed from mouth to mouth.¹ This quality in Kemal's stories surely blends well with the Anatolian setting in which the oral tradition must still be alive. In both 'A Dirty Story' and 'The Shopkeeper', people often come together to exchange stories, even if some of the stories are gossip. For Kemal then, an observation by Walter Benjamin is most appropriate. Benjamin comments that 'experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.'² Kemal, of course, does not appear, in these stories, to have written down known tales in the same way that A. C. Jordan did in his *Tales From Southern Africa*. But there is some evidence that Kemal is writing within a popular tradition he is doubtlessly conscious of. Andrew Mango observes that:

Turkish 'socialist realist' theatrical writing of today, with its stock types of wicked landowners, downtrodden peasants and progressive intellectuals, derives ... from a local tradition of popular pantomimes (called *tuluat* theatre) Turkey's most successful novel of recent years, Yashar Kemal's *Ince Mehmet* (translated as *Mehmet, My Hawk*) is, for all its progressive message, a *destan*, a tale of stirring deeds by a local hero *as told by generations of bazaar storytellers*. [My emphasis]³

Kemal's art then, is rooted in the history of storytelling in Anatolia. Perhaps his remarkable achievement can, to a very large extent, be attributed to this fact. I would now like to highlight some features of Kemal's art in *Anatolian Tales*.

A distinctive feature of Kemal's art is the apparent ease with which he opens his stories. The opening to 'A Dirty Story' for example, is instructive in this regard:

The three of them were sitting on the damp earth, their backs against the dung-daubed brush-wall and their knees drawn up to their chests, when another man walked up and crouched beside them.

'Have you heard?' said one of them excitedly. 'Broken-Nose Jabbar's done it again! You know Jabbar, the fellow who brings all those women from the mountain villages and sells them in the plain? Well, this time he's come down with a couple of real beauties. The lads of Misdik have got

together and bought one of them on the spot, and now they're having fun and making her dance and all that It's unbelievable! Where does the fellow find so many women? How does he get them to come with him? He's the devil's own son, he is....'

'Well, that's how he makes a living,' commented one of the men. 'Ever since I can remember, this Jabbar's been peddling women for the villages of the Chukurova plain. Allah provides for all and sundry....'

The ease of exposition coincides with the ironic ease with which a dehumanising abnormality, the turning of women into mere objects of commerce, has become normal. This creates an ambiguity within the reader, the kind of tense ambiguity which makes for reading enjoyment, in which the narrative style appears to validate an objective social condition which, at the same time, begs to be condemned. Kemal, therefore, dooms us to 'enjoy' injustice as we condemn it. This is a critical tension that stays with us throughout the story. In other words, we accept, as readers, the human validity of the situation before us while asking, at the same time, what terrible social conditions can produce such human beings. The irresistible sense of story, together with the detailed social realism, immediately engages us on two levels: that of imaginative involvement and enjoyment on the one hand, and critical evaluation on the other.

One more passage from 'A Dirty Story' will help us understand other aspects of Kemal's narrative style: how he develops setting, character, dialogue, and suggestive symbols for narrative effects:

Down in the villages of the Chukurova plain a sure sign of oncoming spring is when the women are seen with their heads on one another's lap, picking the lice out of one another's hair. So it was, on one of the first warm days of the year. A balmy sun shone carelessly down on the fields and women were sitting before their huts on the dusty ground, busy with the lice and wagging their tongues for all they were worth. An acrid odour of sweat hung about the group. Seedy Doneh was rummaging in the hair of a large woman who was stretched full length on the ground. She decided that she had been silent long enough.

'No,' she declared, 'it's not as you say, sister! He didn't force her or anything. She simply saw those shiny yellow boots. If you're going to believe Huru!... She's got to deny it, of course....'

The women are gossiping about the Agha's seduction of Hollow Osman's wife. Their dialogue complements their action: the gossip is as pleasurable as the

'picking of lice out of one another's hair'. In this way, the sense of community among the women is sealed, for better or for worse. This sisterhood breaks up sometimes, as when they fail to realise that the practice of wife buying undermines their own dignity. What is normal to the men, as we have seen, is normal to the women too. For example, the women's inability to sympathise with Osman's wife during her terrible ordeal makes them cruel witnesses. The sisterhood breaks up again when in 'The Baby' the women fail to come to the aid of one of them who dies in childbirth, leaving the baby in the care of a helpless man who wanders all over the desolate plains in search of someone kind enough to breast-feed his child. But sometimes, as in 'Drumming Out', the sisterhood can rise to heroic proportions in the fight against the injustice threatening their very lives.

Another feature of the above quote is how it depicts the human tendency to adjust social habits according to changing seasons. Indeed, in all of Kemal's stories we are made conscious of seasons, particularly summer. The hot sun becomes the summer's predominant image. So too the hot dry land and the dust. These conditions are an everpresent background to the people's consciousness. Nevertheless, they go about their business, and, as everywhere, are attempting to bring some semblance of meaning into their lives.

There is also the omnipresent wealth and power of the landowners, the Aghas, whose corruption is probably the most predominant political-economic concern in the plains of Anatolia. In a society that hovers precariously between feudal and capitalistic social formations, the owner of land, that ultimate source of the means of survival, wields almost unlimited power. He can ruin land for profit ('Drumming Out'); he can kill off competition ('Drumming Out' and 'The Shopkeeper'); he can bribe government either with money or with high-sounding patriotic phrases, and he can seduce women with impunity. Kemal, almost unobtrusively, dots here and there the symbols of the Aghas' wealth: shiny yellow boots, white trousers, and brand new cars. It is germane to point out that a lesser writer would probably have been tempted, in order to 'strike a blow' for justice, to dwell overly on these symbols, thus getting out of us more indignation, and less understanding. Kemal is more interested in the actual social processes of injustice than in finished products. He dramatises these processes with much skill, allowing the nefarious activities of the Aghas to *condemn themselves* through their *dramatised* effects.

Overall, *Anatolian Tales* is an unsentimental yet sympathetic portrayal of peasant life with all its jealousies, vindictiveness and cruelty, its powerlessness in the face of the wealthy, and in the ease with which peasant solidarity can break up under stress. But all those foibles are brought out under the con-

trol of the writer's deep creative understanding of his subjects. The peasants are never seen as debased human ghosts inviting only condescending sympathy or pity. They are disturbingly too human for that. The realistic setting, moreover, enables us to understand that the peasant condition is not attributable to some mysterious forces of the 'human condition'. They are what they are largely as a result of a particular kind of life in a given set of physical conditions. Some triumph against these conditions; others are destroyed by them. The result of all this, for the reader, is a kind of understanding that is much deeper than any direct 'message' of 'instruction'. Deeper, because the stories are an occasion not for easy messages, but for asking questions.

The endings of all Kemal's stories in this collection leave us thinking. In the lengthy stories, the ending comes with defeat, and we leave the stories with an uncomfortable feeling of gloom. But this gloom is always accompanied by a kind of quiet, contemplative indignation. There is no resignation, only a quiet determination to find answers. The shorter stories on the other hand, share a rare kind of lyrical triumph. But the lyricism is never allowed to become sentimental. It is always grounded in the actual needs of survival: the cart and the reeds in 'On the Road'; the onion, pine trees and springs in 'Green Onions'; the kiln in 'White Trousers', and just retribution in 'The Shopkeeper'. In these stories, the peasants achieve some victory. But this is no false heroism, for Kemal is aware that to imbue his peasants with undeserved heroism is to condescend towards them, to despise them, to reduce their humanity in an effort that would turn them into mere items in a moral or political debate. Kemal strenuously avoids the kind of heroism that scores points without being, at the same time, a celebration of *achieved* triumph. In the shorter stories, therefore, we are left with a hope that makes us contemplate the validity and worthiness of those moments in life that are joyful; that affirm it.

III

I became aware, after I had read Kemal's stories, that I did not remember ever coming across as compelling a body of fiction about peasant life in South Africa. It then seemed to me that there existed a disturbing silence in South African literature as far as peasants, as subjects of artistic attention, were concerned. There have, of course, been stories here and there. A lot of fiction in the African languages, Zulu or Sesotho, for example, is set in the rural areas. But, almost invariably, the setting soon shifts to the towns; or, if not, the writers, armed with Christian zealotry, are merely concerned with eradicating 'superstition'. Seldom do we see peasants, *in their own right*, struggling to survive against the harsh conditions of nature or man-made injustice.

What seems to be lacking then is an attempt at a sincere imaginative perception that sees South African peasant life as having a certain human validity, albeit a problematic one.

I became aware also, that much exciting and revealing research has been, and continues to be carried out on South African peasants by a recent crop of radical historians. Much of their work has been published by Ravan Press. But, with few exceptions, their research, and the discussions of it, appear to have been confined to the white liberal universities. Nevertheless, there has been no corresponding surge of interest in peasant subjects in our writers and artists: at least none that I am aware of. I cannot exactly make up my mind about the reasons for both the silence and for the lack of interest in response to the scholarly efforts; but I will tentatively suggest a few.

Firstly, as far as the possible response to scholarly research is concerned, we have here yet another glaring tragedy of South African life. For historical reasons, only the whites have some access to the best educational facilities. This means that any research of radical interest which, by definition, has to emanate from, and its evaluation be situated in, the very current of the African struggle as it evolves, has no organic relationship with that struggle. So it cannot enrich the struggle in the *immediate* instance. This is so from the perspective of information giving as well as the assimilation of that information. Michael Vaughan, in a recent issue of *English in Africa*, makes the following observation which is most pertinent to what I'm saying here:

As one white academic critic, I have certainly felt myself drawn more and more to the position that the most socially significant developments in literature in South Africa are taking place in black township literature. To engage with this developing literature in a social-critical spirit has come to represent an absolute critical priority. At the same time, this engagement raises the question of critical 'address'. Black township literature is written by and for the inhabitants of black townships: its concepts, and the criticism and self-criticism that sustain and correct it are derived largely from the ideological and political milieu of the township — a milieu I do not share, except in the form of certain texts, which, furthermore, come to me divorced from their normative contextual associations.⁴

He then states, in what could easily apply to historical research, that 'academic criticism of contemporary black literature must be extremely circumscribed in its practice so long as it is deprived of contact with the writers and public

of this literature'.⁵ It would seem to follow then, that African fiction in South Africa would stand to benefit qualitatively if and when a radical intellectual tradition was to be effectively placed in and developed from the ranks of the mass struggle. There, the writers will also be found.

Secondly, the city appears to have held a tyrannical hold on the imagination of the average African writer. The situation, no doubt, has historical roots. The South African industrial revolution occasioned a massive flow of labour from the rural areas into the towns and cities of the country. Once there, those Africans who managed to acquire an education did not have any material or compelling ideological incentives to return to their peasant origins, neither physically nor imaginatively. We are talking here not of individuals here and there who return, but of socially significant movements. So, peasant consciousness never seriously benefited from the now relatively sophisticated intellectual perspectives of its own original sons and daughters. The 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' theme was the only viable compromise. In time, Jim sank his roots firmly in Jo'burg and encouraged a tendency which validated only the city experience as worthy of artistic attention. The setting had to be Johannesburg, then Cape Town, then Durban, then..., in descending order of importance. In effect, life outside of the major urban centres was all but obliterated. Only the miners would oftentimes be an irritating reminder, as Nat Nakasa observed.⁶

Thirdly, the perception appears to have consolidated within the ranks of the struggle that the decisive element in determining the course of the coming South African future, is the workers in the cities. That might be so, and is theoretically understandable. But what of the millions of Africans in the rural areas who, at that very decisive moment, might decide the fate of the hinterland? What of the deliberate peasantisation of urban Africans by the government through the Bantustans? The peasant position within the economic and political structures that govern the organic relationship between the urban and rural social formations might be theoretically understandable. But the peasant's *actual* aspirations, it seems, are a matter that ought not to be taken for granted.

Whatever the reasons, it does look as if, both from the political and the cultural perspectives, an important dimension has been left out of the total South African experience as that experience attempts to be conscious of itself and to define itself. However, one can predict the coming, in the not too distant future, of an era of urban obsession with rural areas as genuine sources of an array of cultural symbols by which to define a future cultural dispensation in South Africa. In a sense, that era has already begun. When it is running full steam ahead, that era will come with declarations asserting the need for an awareness of tradition that goes back into a peasant past. The era will doubt-

lessly idealise that past, thus defeating its own intentions. Perhaps the time is now in which to make a calm and objective reassessment.

One thing is clear, though. We are in the cities, anyhow, so what is the state of writing there?

In general, writers in the cities seem to be clear about one thing: that their writings should show of themselves and their writers, a commitment to political engagement. According to this view, a poem or a work of fiction should most decidedly be written and be read as offering necessary political insights. It should 'strike a blow for freedom'. Now, while most writers can agree on this aim, they may not necessarily have the same thing in mind about what implications this agreement has for the actual relationship between art and society; or, more specifically, between art and politics. The central problem here appears to lie in the often confusing paradox that art is an autonomous entity which, at the same time, derives its objective validity from and within society. This latter condition would then, by definition, appear to deny artistic autonomy. Something there is, therefore, in art that determines its autonomy; and something there is that appears necessarily to undercut that autonomy. Writers might therefore fall into two camps: according to whether they emphasise what makes for artistic autonomy, on the one hand; or, on the other hand, according to whether they emphasise the undercutting elements. It is the latter camp that is often easily defined as 'managed' or 'committed' or 'relevant'.

What so readily seems to undercut the autonomy of art is its subject matter: the specificity of setting, the familiarity of character, recognisable events in either recent or distant history, and other similar factors that ground a work firmly in the time and space. In societies such as South Africa, where social, economic, and political oppression is most stark, such conditions tend to enforce, almost with the power of natural law, overt tendentiousness in the artist's choice of subject matter, and in the handling of that subject matter. It is such tendentiousness which, because it can most easily be interpreted as 'taking a position', earns a work of art displaying it, the title of 'commitment' or 'engagement'. Clearly then, according to this attitude, artistic merit or relevance is determined less by a work's internal coherence (a decisive principle for autonomy), than by the work's displaying a high level of explicit political preoccupation which may not necessarily be too critical of the demands of the artistic medium chosen.

If the average South African writer has chosen this kind of preoccupation, what effect has it had on his writing? One major effect is that the writing's probing into the South African experience has been largely superficial. This

superficiality comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can easily be characterised as ones of either good or evil, or, even more accurately, symbols of evil on the one hand, and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand. Thus, as far as the former kinds of symbols are concerned, we will find an array of 'sell-outs', 'baases', 'madams', policemen, cruel farmers and their overseers, bantustans, farm labour, township superintendents and their subordinate functionaries. On the other hand, the victims will be tsotsis, convicts, beggars, washerwomen, road-gang diggers, night-watchmen, priests, shebeen kings and queens, and various kinds of 'law-abiding' citizens. All these symbols appear in most of our writings as finished products, often without a personal history. As such they appear as mere ideas to be marshalled this way or that in a moral debate. Their *human* anonymity becomes the dialectical equivalent of the anonymity to which the oppressive system consigns millions of oppressed Africans. Thus, instead of clarifying the tragic human experience of oppression, such fiction becomes grounded in the very negation it seeks to transcend.

The problem is that this kind of fiction is almost certainly the product of an ideology whose analysis of society is based on moral premises. In this view, the problems of South Africa are premised on the moral evil of apartheid. The major commitment of such a moral ideology is the *exposure* of the existence of social evil with the aim of pricking the human conscience of those responsible for that evil. The result is not knowledge but indictment; and indictment, because it assumes an accusatory stance, evokes a defensive attitude which might compel the evil-doers not to re-evaluate their position, but to push their evil-producing programme fast in order that their 'utopian' aims might be realised sooner, thus proving the indictment against them false. All this is because moral ideology tends to ossify complex social problems into symbols which are perceived as finished forms of good or evil, instead of leading us towards important and necessary insights into social *processes* leading to those finished forms. Thus, showing no more than surfaces, writings influenced by such an ideology tend to *inform* without involving readers in a truly transforming experience.

Indeed, the problem of *information* in a modern capitalist society appears to be at the root of the matter. (It is not too long ago that South Africa had what was called the 'Information Scandal'.) The issue is that indictment, by its very nature, requires *information* in order to be validated. And the more dramatic the information, and the more strikingly perfect it is in its finished form as a symbol of the devastating effects of *apartheid*, then the more desirable

it is as a weapon of moral war. Thus, the writer of indictment soon gives himself up to dealing with the oppressive negation on its own terms. And these terms, at their starkest, are numbing sensationalism and its consequent smothering of creative thinking. What we have is a conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social information. It is at this point that a competition between creative writing and journalism ensues. Lewis Nkosi's criticism of this 'competition' is well known.⁷ In fact, it is not accurate to describe this relationship as a competitive one. Rather, what we have is creative writing's almost obsessive emulation of journalism. But Lewis Nkosi did not go far enough in his analysis of the problem.

The phenomenon of information in a capitalist society hinges on such issues as who produces the information, who interprets it, and who disseminates it. Now, to the average African writer in South Africa, naturally placed in opposition to the government by virtue of race, colour, economic and political status, the production, interpretation, and dissemination of information by the South African government and its agencies renders such information suspect. On the other hand, information produced, interpreted and disseminated by a variety of liberal institutions is more readily accepted because such institutions are perceived to be morally in opposition to established Government policy on matters of race relations. Such acceptance, in the evolution of African political resistance, has over the years, almost become dependence. This dependence was almost unavoidable. The liberal institutions of higher learning, liberal research agencies, and the liberal press have, by pouring out masses of information as examples of the iniquities of *apartheid*, dominated the information giving activity for the general opposition.

Furthermore, the liberal institutions' essentially anthropological interest in African society gradually consolidated a picture of African society under South African oppression as a debased society. Studies and press reports on tsotsi violence, shebeens, convicts, sexual promiscuity, faction fighting, mine compound life, 'witchdoctors', 'strange' African customs and other instances of pathetic suffering have determined the public's (both black and white) perceptions of African suffering under *apartheid*. On the other hand, African medical doctors, teachers, township musicians, lawyers and others have been condescendingly promoted as symbols of African progress. But such promotional activity produced its opposite effect; the reinforcement of the image of debasement, because what was finally seen were caricatures of sophisticated white men. Needless to say, all these images were highly marketable ones, and the press did its duty consolidating stereotypes and prejudices. In African newspapers advertising promoted corresponding commodities of debasement:

liquor, skin lightening creams, high-tar tobacco on the one hand, and correspondence schools, etc. on the other hand, playing on eager hopes.

One can probably assert with some confidence then, that the average literate African's perception and conceptualisation of the African predicament in South Africa has been fashioned by a broad spectrum of the white liberal establishment. For example, the popularity of the *Daily Mail* and its influence in the townships over the years should always be understood within the context of the newspaper's link with Anglo-American, which in turn has more than casual links with such institutions of higher learning as the University of the Witwatersrand, and such liberal research agencies as the Institute of Race Relations, all of which belong to a specific ideological climate.

It can be surmised then, that in general the African resistance movement has not been in control of the information gathering, interpretation, and dissemination process. Under such conditions it is easy for sloganeering, defined as superficial thinking, to develop. The psychology of the slogan in these circumstances is the psychology of intellectual powerlessness. For example, the constant reference to the terrible South African Establishment as fascist, racist, imperialist, satanic, etc., while true, becomes mere verbal evocation acting as a facade for what might appear to be an empty and desperate intellectual centre lacking in firmly established traditions of intellectual rigour. The slogan is the substitution of the gut response for clarity of analysis based on systematically acquired information. Those who have not domesticated the information gathering process at the institutional level are doomed to receive information, even about themselves, second-hand. It will be argued, of course, that Africans *do* have information about themselves as the actual sufferers. That is so. But such information has only biological validity. Only institutionalised information is subject to ideological scrutiny. Unfortunately there has not been, among Africans, a consistently original intellectual and analytical base from which to domesticate information and turn it into a truly transforming tool of liberation.

Now, it is at the level of slogans that the resistance movement has traditionally turned away from the liberal establishment, in order to marshal the second-hand information against Afrikaner political power. The resulting conflict has a dimension to it that can most clearly be seen as a clash of slogans. It might be wondered why the Afrikaner resorts to slogans when he has his own information gathering, interpretation, and dissemination agencies. One possible answer is that the intellectual tradition of the Afrikaner must, with few exceptions, surely be based on one of the most profound traditions of rationalisations ever conceived, for surely they must see the evil of their own creation.

It is at the point of this recognition that their own slogans begin. The purpose of Rhoodie's Information agency was precisely to market oppression through attractive packages of slogans. In this situation, it is easy to see how the marketing of oppression through the various state agencies produces its dialectical opposite: the 'marketing' of resistance. In this conflict, the slogan of oppression qualitatively equals the slogan of resistance. Both are verbal claims making little attempt to genuinely involve the 'consumers' as equals in the quest for truth.

What implications has all this had for creative writing? It should be clear. I once met a writer who gleefully told me how honoured he felt that his book of poetry had been banned by the South African censors. What I found disturbing was the ease with which the writer ascribed some kind of heroism to himself, almost glorying in a negation. It did not occur to him, of course, that the censors may have banned his work precisely because they may have seen in it their own 'games', their own tactics, their own quality of propaganda, their own vindictiveness, their own debasement. The writer may have concentrated on those aspects of social reality and the methods of treating that reality which interest the censors to the extent that the censors cannot think beyond them. The censor may have seen not experience, but social information that simply conflicted with his own. The whole problem, of course, might be more complex than that. I was merely trying to challenge what seems to be a dangerously complacent attitude.

The point of the matter is that the average African writer, working under an information ethos which for him has not habituated a tradition of rigorous analysis and interpretation, produces an art of anticipated surfaces rather than one of processes: processes in character development or in social evolution, for example. He produces an art that is grounded in the negation of social debasement, where scenes of social violence and a host of examples of general social oppression become ends in themselves. As a result very little transformation in reader consciousness is to be expected since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition. Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms. Beyond that confirmation, it may even reinforce the frustration produced by the reader's now further consolidated perception of an overwhelmingly negative social reality.

For example, it will be recalled that it was the aesthetics of recognition that was the basis of dissatisfaction with the early poetry of Oswald Mtshali. I have also found Mtutuzeli Matshoba's depiction of social reality in his stories simply too overwhelming. His basic technique has been to accumulate fact after fact of oppression and suffering, so that we are in the end almost totally ground-

ed in this reality without being offered, at the same time, an opportunity for aesthetic and critical estrangement. Recently, Mbulelo Mzamane has produced a novel, *The Children of Soweto*, grounded almost entirely in the events of June 16, 1976. I found no independent narrative line that permits any reader involvement beyond the act of recognition. On the contrary Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind* has an independent plot line. An African guerilla fighter has sneaked back into South Africa on a mission to kill. His arrival coincides with the events of June 16, 1976. It is this existence of a plot line that makes Sepamla's novel more narratively engaging than Mzamane's. Sepamla constantly struggles to subject the objective events to the demands of his art. He does not entirely succeed, but he is moving in the right direction.

Where lies the possible remedy then?

Basically, the demands of the craft of fiction are that a writer has to have a more than casual view of the relationship between fiction and society, or between artistic information and social information. The world of fiction demands that the writer grapples with some of the following problems which are basic to his art: setting, conflict, credible characterisation, consistent narrative point of view, the complexities of fictional language and time. Beyond these essential technical issues, a serious writer must address himself to the ideological nature of fiction, since the handling of social information, whether within the narrative, or within ordinary discourse, is always ideologically determined. The moralistic ideology of liberalism for example, has forced our literature into a tradition of almost mechanistic surface representation. On the other hand, an ideological stance which stresses, as a condition for meaningful knowledge acquisition, social or historical process will more easily dispose writers towards a more explanatory approach to fiction. To work from the perspective of process is to attempt to situate individual events within an explainable totality of social meaning.

The example of character development may serve to shed some light on what I am trying to say. In a critical appreciation of Mtutuzeli Matshoba's stories (*Staffrider*, Vol. 4, No. 3), Michael Vaughan observes that in Matshoba's work 'the whole liberal preoccupation with the individual interiority, and hence with subtle and elaborate characterisation is dispensed with. Characterisation establishes individual specificity and separateness, a function which is not relevant to Matshoba's project.' It seems clear that Vaughan's position with regard to liberal philosophy is critical. On this basis, although he does not say so explicitly, Vaughan implies that a writer's concern with subjectivity in character development may amount to a bourgeois or liberal escapism into an ethos of individualism. But is that necessarily so?

Herbert Marcuse's views on the question of subjectivity in bourgeois culture are too persuasive to be easily dispensed with. He notes that:

even in bourgeois society, insistence on the truth and right of inwardness is not really a bourgeois value. With the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence. Indeed, this escape from reality led to an experience which could (and did) become a powerful force in invalidating the actually prevailing bourgeois values, namely by shifting the locus of the individual's realisation from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience. Moreover, withdrawal and retreat were not the last position. Subjectivity strove to break out of its inwardness into the material and intellectual culture. And today, in the totalitarian period, it has become a political value as a counterforce against aggressive and exploitative socialisation.⁸

The point, therefore, is not to avoid interiority, but to render it *as concretely as possible* within the unfolding logic of narrative.

As I am writing this essay, I happen to be reading Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, and I have only just finished a chapter which begins in the following manner:

The mule suddenly sat down under the priest. It was not an unnatural thing to do, for they had been travelling through the forest for nearly twelve hours. They had been going west, but news of soldiers met them there and they had turned east; the Red Shirts were active in that direction, so they had tacked north, wading through swamps, diving into the mahogany darkness. Now they were both tired out and the mule simply sat down. The priest scrambled off and began to laugh. He was feeling happy. It is one of the strange discoveries a man can make that life, however you lead it, contains moments of exhilaration; there are always comparisons which can be made with worse times: even in danger and misery the pendulum swings.⁹

Here is a man during a moment of insightful intimacy with himself; a moment of transcendence. Most wonderful in this little piece of narrative is how it makes subtle shifts in narrative point of view: how it is now outside and objective ('the mule suddenly sat down under the priest'), and now it is inside and sub-

jective ('it was not an unnatural thing to do'). The latter is an evaluative statement that can only spring from inner reflection. In a subtle manner, we are let into the subjective life of the priest through a deceptively objective narrative stance. The picture suggested of the priest is that of a sympathetic man, grateful that his mule has, apparently, led him out of danger. The priest is deeply relieved that his keen sense of self-preservation has led him to safety. Seen in this perspective, the laughter of the priest is far from irrational. It represents a triumphant moment of inner realisation, triggered off by the sense of the priest's having momentarily overcome objective danger and finding himself in a moment of deserved celebration. Such moments are not an escape into bourgeois phantasy. On the contrary, they are moments of universal experience, and because we recognise them as such whenever we see them, we are, in this case, led into a sympathetic pact with the priest. Here is what I mean by interiority concretely rendered.

It seems clear therefore, that it is humanly unrealistic to show a revolutionary hero, for example, who has no inner doubts. All great revolutionaries from Lenin, through Nkrumah, to Che Guevara, among others, have had to grapple with inner fears, anxieties, and doubts. In appreciating this fact, one gains an insight into the human reality of their heroism. A reader, confronted with such heroism, experiences himself as potentially capable of it too, only if he could learn to find a method of dealing with his fears.

'The need for radical change,' asserts Marcuse, 'must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals.'¹⁰ The specific subjectivity of character is universalised through the reader's recognition of familiar emotion generated in a given event. Thus, a reader, confronted with a *dramatisation of process* in character development, grows with the story.

Perhaps more light can be thrown on this issue if one considers the problem of the villain in a story. This is particularly pertinent to the problem of portraying functionaries of the oppressive system in South Africa: the 'mayors', 'presidents' of 'independent states', policemen, informers, etc. Is it useful, in the quest for a transforming social understanding, for a writer to always portray such characters as finished products: unaccountably vicious, cruel, malicious, fawning and greedy? Obviously not. And here, the maturity of the writer is called for, since he is called upon to be narratively fair-minded even to those he socially abhors. The point is that attempting to understand the villain in all his complexity does not necessarily imply a political acceptance of him. On the contrary, it intensifies political opposition even more. Artistic compassion only situates the villain within the domain of tragic acceptance,

which, in practice, translates itself into moral or political rejection. We cannot wish away evil; but genuine art makes us understand it. Only then can we purposefully deal with it.

Returning to Vaughan's discussion of Matshoba's characterisation, one would note that where the demand for a surface art emanates from within the radical intellectual movement, it becomes the dialectical opposite of the demonstrative liberal approach already seen above. It represents no qualitative improvement. On the contrary, it manages to become a liberalisation of the practice of radical dialectical thinking by appearing to give political morality an all too ready precedence over inclusive and liberating understanding.

Finally, I want to make reference to a very interesting interview of Miriam Tlali, Siphon Sepamla, and Mothobi Mutloatse, by Jaki Seroke (*Staffrider*, Vol. 4, No. 3), in which at least two issues of interest to me are raised. Firstly, Mothobi Mutloatse criticises the press for being 'so sweeping in its criticism of the new wave of black writing. They say it is too obviously political; it cannot offer anything else. We see the new writing as part of what is happening. It is a type of writing that is *perfectly suited to the times*. We need a writing that *records exactly* the situation we live in, and any writing which *ignores the urgency of political events* will be *irrelevant*' [emphasis mine]. One might ask: in what way is writing 'perfectly suited to the times'? In what way does writing 'record exactly the situation we live in'? What kind of writing, emerging at the same time as the writing that fulfils Mutloatse's conditions, is deemed to ignore 'the urgency of political events', thus rendering itself 'irrelevant', even possibly, irrespective of the seriousness of its intention? These questions raise serious critical questions the answers to which ought not to be complacently taken for granted. And in addressing those questions, we may need to make a distinction between the *journalistic*, informational ambience on the one hand, and the *storytelling*, narrative ambience on the other.

For example, Miriam Tlali complains that she has been accused of speaking 'about the matters just as they are instead of building them into the emotions of the reader. As if it's just reporting.' But why is the parting scene at the end of Tlali's novel, *Amandla*, so effective? It's because the hero and his girl *are in love*. Any situation that forces lovers apart will invite our condemnation. Now, the vast majority of people, I think, enjoy reading about lovers. Almost all of us are, or were, or will be lovers. Thus, we feel with Tlali's lovers, we can identify with their problem. What Tlali has done is build into her characters 'the emotions of the reader': the very thing which Tlali, in this interview, appears not to want her work to be associated with. Clearly, the artist in her, repudiates the critic in her. In any case, *Amandla* is, in my opin-

ion, the best of the novels written on the events of June 16, 1976. It surpasses, in the quality of its art, Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, and Mzamane's *Children of Soweto*. Tlali was not 'just reporting', she was telling a story.

When Sipho Sepamla in the interview agrees with Miriam Tlali that 'we have to go to the people', for 'it is the man in the street that I feel we must listen to', he is probably establishing the premise on which is based one fundamental assumption shared by all three writers: that the 'political' writers are writing what the African masses really want. Is that assumption a valid one? When Sepamla listens to 'the man in the street' what does he hear? I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven masterpieces of entertainment and instruction. Others were so popular that commuters made sure they did not miss the storytellers' trains. The vast majority of the stories were either tragedies or comedies about lovers, township jealousies, the worries of widows; about consulting medicine men for luck at horse racing, or luck for getting a job or for winning a football match; about fantastic ghost stories (let's remember here Bheki Maseko's 'Mamlambo', *Staffrider*, Vol. 5 No. 1; here is a writer who has listened to the man in the street, and heard); they have woven satires about the assassination of Verwoerd by Tsafendas (even the art of stabbing in the townships became, 'I will tsafenda you'); they have woven stories about helicopter weddings, about African soldiers seeing ships, the sea and Europe for the first time in World War II. And we have to face the truth here: there were proportionally fewer overtly political stories. When they talked politics, they talked politics; when they told stories, they told stories. If any political concept crept into the stories, it was domesticated by a fundamental interest in the evocation of the general quality of African life in the township. Where is the concept of 'relevance' here?

When we turn to the lyrics of the vast majority of popular songs in 'soul' and mbaqanga music, we find a similar situation: lyrics about infidelity, about the relationships between women and their in-laws, about going to work early in the morning, about weddings, about the joys of music. As I am writing, a new hit is ringing in my mind. The lyrics tell school children to heed the school bell summoning them to go and learn how to read, write, count, and sing. Then I am reminded of Thamsanqa's story 'Have You Seen Sticks?' (*Staffrider*, Vol. 4, No. 3), and then the entire African experience of going to school in South Africa is laid bare before me, accompanied by an exhilaration emerging from my having been given the opportunity to recall, to reflect and to evaluate a communal experience in all the townships of South Africa; indeed, the world over.

In all these stories and songs, I am made conscious of Africans in South Africa as makers of culture in their own right. I am made conscious of them as philosophers, asking ultimate questions about life, moral values, and social being. And I am forced to conclude that if the conscious political will does not embrace this totality, it is bound to come out with a skewed vision of the future. I am aware too, that we *do* have novels which address themselves to this totality: Dikobe's *Marabi Dance*; Nyembezi's *Inkisola Yase Mgungundlovu*; Mofolo's *Chaka*; Jordan's *Inqambo Yeminyanya*; Boetie's *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost*; Mphahlele's *In Corner B*; and more recently, the stories of Joel Matlou and Bheki Maseko in *Staffrider*. What is common to these writers is that they are storytellers, not just case makers. They give African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture. They make it possible for people to realise that in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are seen not to be *explicitly* resistance oriented, are valid. Indeed, the latter may upon reflection (crucial to the undercutting of the ethos of the market place) be found to represent a much wider, and richer, because more inclusive, context of resistance. The matter is simple: there is a difference between art that 'sells' ideas to the people, and that whose ideas are *embraced* by the people, because they have been made to understand them through the evocation of lived experience in all its complexities. In the former case, the readers are anonymous buyers; in the latter, they are equals in the quest for truth. All the writer needs to understand is that he can only be genuinely committed to politics through a commitment to the demands of his art.

There is one other thing that emerges from the *Staffrider* interview. There appears to be a rather disturbing anti-intellectual attitude in Sepamla and Tlali with regard to the practice of literary criticism. We have just seen above how Tlali's artistic practice contradicts her own critical assertions. She continues later: 'Writing is an art like all the other art forms and it should not be pipelined or squeezed in a water-tight channel.' Isn't this what the critics are in fact saying? They wouldn't agree more, for they perceive the literary situation to be narrow-minded and 'pipelined or squeezed' in its artistic orientation. It seems to me that Miriam Tlali may not have fully and carefully thought out the implications of her own artistic practice, and all too readily dismisses the critic who, if he is serious and genuine, might *legitimately* raise issues that may clarify her own position.

About readers and critics, Miriam Tlali declares: 'It is the reader who must judge, not these masters of literature.' One might ask: are critics not readers too? Of course, what she means is that she prefers the judgement of the enthusiastically uncritical average reader (she is after all one up on them — she

spent much thought in composing her novels), to the judgement of one who may painstakingly have spent much thought in trying to *understand* her work. I do not believe that is what she really desires, for she goes on to say: 'It is quite a task to write. In the first place you have to be fortunate enough to have an education which can enable you to express yourself.' Although Tlali accepts the importance of education, she does not go far enough. One result of education is heightened, critical awareness which will not shy away from applying that awareness to literature. Surely this is what she wants!

Furthermore, Tlali is surely correct in complaining that 'so-called critics labour under a misconception in that they say that in order to write you have to be a literary scholar'. A writer does not have to be a literary scholar in the academic sense. But then, it is useful to note what Henry James, the United States writer, has to say on the issue. 'There is,' he says, 'one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together: that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth.'¹¹ At the root of this sentiment is the requirement that since the world and the people on it are the writer's business, he has to constantly enlarge his intellectual horizons regarding his key focus. There seems no escape from this necessity.

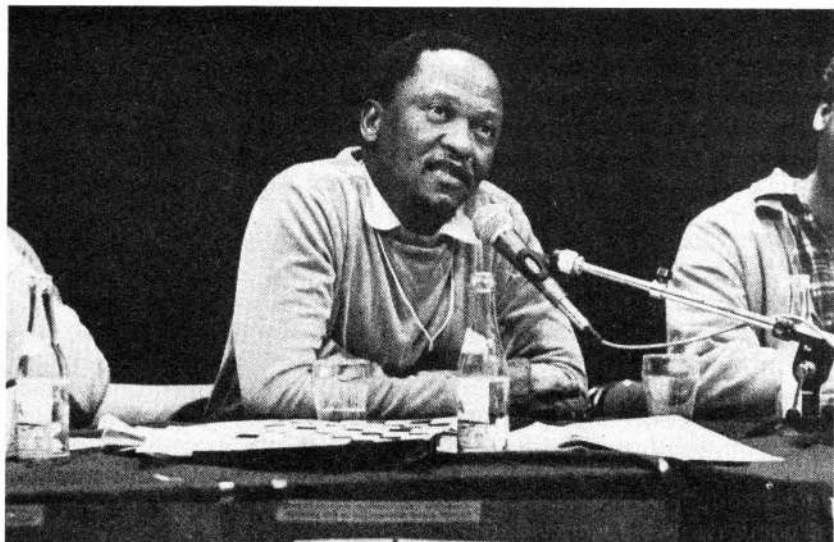
Sepamla echoes Tlali on the question of critics: 'Instead of encouraging a person who is making an attempt we try to destroy this person. What we hope to gain mystifies me. There is nothing that a so-called critic will gain by destroying this book. Instead he will prevent the black people from making progress.' Sepamla goes on to lament the fact that 'some of these critics are Black Consciousness adherents'. Firstly, there is a danger here that critics might be accused of being unpatriotic simply because we do not agree with what they say. Secondly, does it mean that 'Black Consciousness adherents' must uncritically rave enthusiastically about anything written? Nothing could be more dangerous to the struggle than the suppression of criticism. The two attitudes above are not only anti-intellectual, they are also essentially undemocratic. If we want to struggle towards a genuinely democratic future, then we must be prepared to subject *everything* to rigorous intellectual scrutiny followed by open and fearless discussion. Writers and critics can make their contribution too. The future is too demanding on us for us to feel sorry for ourselves.

We have come a long way from Turkish tales. The thoughts they have triggered no doubt need further discussion. I could not at this stage go beyond a preliminary identification and statement of key problems. The Turkish tales,

I believe, contain the essence of what is universal in the art of narrative. My attention was then necessarily turned home, where I believe we should produce works that will not only inspire us through the enchanting powers of art, but will also be embraced well beyond our borders as a joyful lesson too.

NOTES

1. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn (trans), (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).
2. Walter Benjamin, p.84.
3. Andrew Mango, *Turkey* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983), pp.122-3.
4. Michael Vaughan, 'Ideological Directions in the Study of Southern African Literature', *English in Africa*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1982, p.62.
5. Michael Vaughan, p.63.
6. Nat Nakasa, 'Johannesburg Johannesburg', *The Classic*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1966, p.19.
7. Lewis Nkosi, 'Fiction by Black South Africans', in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longman, 1967), p.222.
8. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp.4-5.
9. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (UK: Penguin Books, 1962), p.59.
10. Herbert Marcuse, p.3.
11. Henry James, *The House of Fiction*, ed. L. Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), p.44.



NJABULO S. NDEBELE

The Writer as Critic and Interventionist

*Njabulo S. Ndebele, President of the Congress of South African Writers and recipient of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa for his collection of short fiction **Fools and Other Stories** in 1984, was recently in Johannesburg where Andries Walter Oliphant spoke to him about his writing and his role in South African literature.*

STAFFRIDER: Njabulo, your acclaimed collection *Fools and Other Stories* draws extensively on childhood and the experience of growing up in South Africa. Was there perhaps a particular incident, event or experience in your childhood that was decisive for your writing?

NDEBELE: First of all, I must say that I do not think I decided to write or started writing because of any particular experience as a child. On the other hand, whatever childhood experience seems to have found its way into my writing is mainly attributable to my inherent interest in writing itself. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that I started by writing poetry, and even then I seem to have been primarily concerned with the harsh injustices in this society and the ways in which this could be countered by means of the creative imagination.

However, my interest in children is, if I have to provide a rational account of this, perhaps related to the fact that when injustices are perpetrated against children, as they are in South Africa, then it surely must point to something fundamentally wrong with the society. This fact struck my youthful imagination very profoundly, and as a result I wrote quite a number of poems about children.

In addition, while I was writing poems concerned with children I encountered the writings of other poets who were concerned with similar themes. I can, for instance, mention here the work of Dylan Thomas whose language I found vigorous and complex. The same can, of course, be said of his imagination. I read his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. I also explored the work of other fiction writers, such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and several other writers who concerned themselves with the themes of childhood and youth. Thus, by the time I came to write *Fools* there were a number of diverse influences which crystallised in my own prose.

STAFFRIDER: Did your shift from poetry to prose precede or coincide with your departure from South Africa?

NDEBELE: I started writing fiction before going abroad. In fact, I started experimenting with the short story form many years before leaving South Africa for studies abroad. I think it was around 1969-1970, when I started writing short stories. It was during my first year at university. I remember writing a story quite similar to the Mozambican writer Luis Bernardo Honwana's *We Killed Mangy Dog*. The story was stylistically very close to what Honwana had done. I would say, therefore, that I made the transition long before I left the country.

On the other hand while I was at Cambridge I did not do any creative writing. I was really reading as much as I could in modern European and Eastern European literature. I delved into Soviet writing and the great tradition of Russian literature. By the way, I recall being particularly fascinated by Joyce's *Ulysses* and writing a couple of foolish imitations. That was about all the creative writing I did when I was in England.

When I left for the United States I started writing the story 'The Music of the Violin', which I completed there. The rest followed shortly afterwards although the ideas for most of the stories had been with me for quite a while. In retrospect, I think that what the overseas experience afforded me, apart from reading and research opportunities, was a necessary distancing from South Africa. This, paradoxically, served as a means of recall, of retaining a kind of distilled memory. I found that being removed from some experiences at home served to recall those very experiences in a very vivid and compelling manner.

STAFFRIDER: Yes, it is often claimed that exile leads to a diminution of in-

timacy with one's place of origin. This might be valid in the case of prolonged absence, but apart from the crucial aspects of recall and reflection, I think absence from a place with which one is deeply engaged can lead to the enhancement of the specificity of that place in relation to other places. This then may establish the possibility of engaging in a radically transformed fashion with one's place of origin.

NDEBELE: That is quite true. I think it is very well stated in terms of my own experience.

STAFFRIDER: Apart from your creative writing you have also played a crucial role in directing and shaping critical discourse around South African literature. I am thinking here of your essays in which you expose the shortcomings in some South African creative as well as critical writings. Could you perhaps elaborate on the genesis of your critical thought?

NDEBELE: Certainly. I think one has to note that as in the case of my creative writing I started reading widely in and on South African literature long before my departure abroad. My father, who has always been open to developments in the cultural field, subscribed to a variety of magazines such as *Africa South*, *Lantern*, *Classic*, *Contrast*, *New Coin* and others. These were available at home and so I came across the work of major South African writers. There were also banned books which my father kept in discreet places. Many of these books have, of course, since been unbanned. What is important, however, is that I had access to these right inside my home. So, quite early in my life I became aware of the critical debates that were generated around South African literature.

I remember coming across Lewis Nkosi's now famous writings on South African literature.¹ I must admit, though, that I was very hostile to his point of view. I was a young man then. Today I understand and sympathise with impatient young writers who militate against cautionary strictures and advice on how to improve their writing. However, the necessity to formalise our creative intervention is something I was confronted with very early. It was necessary for me, and I think it is necessary for all young writers, to undergo an apprenticeship under the guidance of more experienced writers. I am aware of the fear among young writers that an emphasis on literary skill and technique will lead to a loss of political relevance. The truth, however, is that mastery over one's craft enables one to return to social and political issues with far greater freedom, understanding, insight and comprehensiveness.

But to return to your question, I was aware of these debates for a very long time. However, I realised, starting with hostility towards Lewis's criticisms, that it was imperative to develop the means of rigorous self-criticism. This necessitated revising and reconstructing my work with the aim of avoiding trivialisation and infusing greater complexity and richness into whatever I wrote. I came to understand that it requires both critical and imaginative devotion

when one is engaged in creative practice. It was through developing this self-critical aspect in my own writing that I came to appreciate Lewis's criticism of South African writing.

However, I subsequently came to suspect that Lewis had perhaps not gone far enough in exposing the problem. I then embarked on approaching the problem from the basis of my understanding of the nature and status of information in this society. This involved a process of acquiring information which is systematically withheld. There was the implication that information, under such circumstances, is often seen as inherently subversive. This, however, was only the first step. After acquiring information, one had to go further and demonstrate one's political allegiances by applying and utilising this information in a practical manner. This is where I located the problem. I came to understand that the writer did not necessarily have to avoid information, but had to develop the means of handling the information on his or her own terms with the aim of deepening our insight into the South African predicament. This requires recognition of the complexity of the situation we are confronted with, and proceeding to work out counter-means which are commensurate to this complexity. We have to examine our fixed positions by means of strategies which entail, in the dictum of George Steiner, that we respect and suspect everything and all views we encounter in the course of our creative engagements.

I think by respecting the complexity of our problems and suspecting simplifications, we will be able to move forward on much firmer ground than the tradition that has dominated political and cultural discourse in this country. *STAFFRIDER*: Apart from your creative and critical work, a third area of your participation in South African culture revolves around your leadership in the organisation of writers. Could we in this context talk about the recent formation of the Congress of South African Writers in relation to the dissolution of PEN in the late seventies and developments in the intervening years?

NDEBELE: To begin with, the dissolution of PEN is historically understandable. I have just recently been reading some of the documentation concerning this event. From this one can perceive the forces which were in operation then. Given the racist traditions which dominate life in South Africa it is difficult to conceive of leading one's life and participating in activities which are free of the oppressive distortions which govern this society.

The ideals of PEN came up against the disillusionment of blacks who had in the course of the mid-seventies experienced the brutal extermination of children, the silencing and destruction of political and cultural organisations and pressure from the community to reconsider alliances with organisations which sought to disguise the racial aspect in the oppression by the South African State. Thus, the withdrawal of blacks from an ostensibly multiracial organisation like PEN South Africa was perfectly understandable.

However, in the context of some of my earlier remarks, it remains impor-

tant to be constantly vigilant that despite one's participation in the discourse of opposition and resistance, one does not conduct the opposition in the terms specified by the culture of oppression. A voice which rose clearly above this conflict was that of Mafika Gwala. I recall him saying that we must be careful not to reduce the problem in South Africa to race only, since it is also a problem of class. Therefore, by withdrawing into a racial category it does not mean that one will not encounter problems which originate within the domain of class. In this regard one has to be careful of how one identifies and analyses the nature of the problems in South Africa.

At the time of the disbanding of PEN I was out of the country. I learnt about the establishment of the African Writers' Association and welcomed the development since I was involved in creative writing. I became a member of the organisation and conducted several workshops to assist young writers. This is something I continue to do. But I think the problem for me now is that I cannot ignore the phenomenal growth of the mass democratic movement over the past few years. This imposes a challenge on us within the cultural sphere to create a dynamic cultural movement which is inclusive and coherent. Therefore, the non-racial stance of the Congress of South African Writers, of which I am president, is very important. It should be understood that our insistence on non-racialism is not a form of privileging white people as some special category, but that it would be fatal at this point in time to resort to organisational strategies which are responsible for our oppression in the first place.

This, however, does not mean that the African component of South African culture is diminished. Instead, it enables the African dimension to embrace a diversity of experiences, thus enriching it. This, in part, is the significance of the Congress of South African Writers within the mass-based democratic movement. It is the supportive response of writers to the broad resistance, and as such COSAW is open to the suggestions, strategies and long-term goals of the historical movement. It also welcomes the participation of the African Writers' Association in its workshops and seminars with the understanding that the differences between our two organisations are, in the final analysis, very small. The one principle we do insist on, however, is non-racialism.

STAFFRIDER: The magazine *Staffrider* is in its tenth year of publication. You have over the years been an important contributor to the magazine. As editor of *Staffrider* I am particularly interested in assessments of the magazine, its achievements and failures over the past decade as well as the direction it should take from now on.

NDEBELE: *Staffrider* has in a very crucial and interesting way been involved with the re-emergence of the resistance movement in the seventies as well as the development of the workers' movement more recently. This is to say that *Staffrider* has been part and parcel of the spread of a democratic culture. It was instrumental in the process whereby more and more people in this coun-

try were enabled to have an effective say on the social, cultural and political affairs affecting them. On the cultural level this democratic option manifested itself in the formation of numerous cultural groups all over the country.

The work of these groups found its way into the magazine and even the most inexperienced writers were given the opportunity to articulate their experiences and views. This was important and the unevenness in the quality of the voices is the direct result of the non-elitist democratic orientation of the magazine. It gave large numbers of young writers and artists the opportunity to be exposed to the broad South African public. As far as this is concerned *Staffrider* fulfilled its role very effectively.

However, in line with my belief in the spirit of self-criticism and self-evaluation, I believe this should also be applicable to *Staffrider*. Thus, while we are engaged in harnessing the necessary sophistication of conceptual, organisational and political means to effectively oppose apartheid, *Staffrider* too must come to terms with this. It has to focus on the fine points of writing, engage in the great cultural and political debates and help to crystallise the role of cultural workers and progressive intellectuals in this country. It has to analyse the social perceptions of the oppressed as well as the oppressor. It should aim at broadening the areas of discussion as far as possible. I think people are ready for this.

STAFFRIDER: To conclude, could you give me an indication of the direction your own creative and critical writing will be taking?

NDEBELE: First of all, I will be concentrating on expository writing mainly in the field of academic research. I want to make a contribution in devising and preparing a new cultural and literary programme for educational institutions. At this point it entails a lot of research and writing. It does not help to say that you want a curriculum which reflects South African society unless you have the primary materials and the conceptual as well as critical means to carry this through.

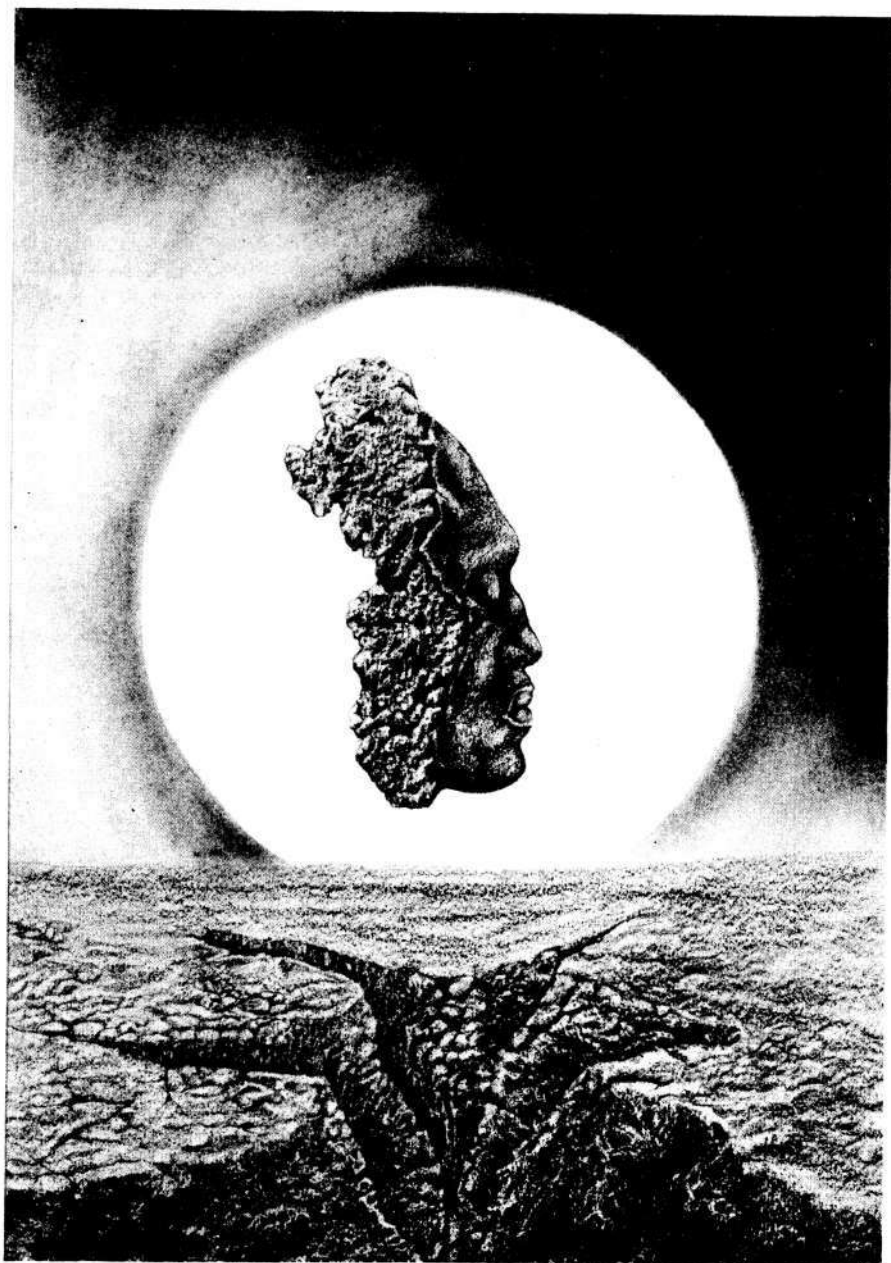
In addition I will give equal attention to my fiction. I am working on a novel right now and I maintain a long-term interest in the short story. Among the things I would like to explore are the experiences I have absorbed while living in Lesotho. As a matter of fact I have just finished a children's story which draws on the people and culture of Lesotho. I foresee more of this being produced in the near future.

NOTE

1. These essays by Lewis Nkosi have since been published under the title *Home and Exile* (Longman).



Paul Stopforth



Fikile *Observer*

Popular History

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You Have to Be a Man

Mr X, unlicensed fresh produce and poultry vendor, speaks to
Miriam Tlali

There's a lot one could do in this work of mine. Lots of money. Who doesn't need money, Sis? Everybody wants money. We are not like people in the farms who can sit in the shades for some months and wait for crops to grow and ripen. Here, if you sit in the shade you die. There's rent, food and other things. Do you know how many lose their houses and get thrown out for failing to pay? (*He pinches his eyes and smiles.*) O-ho-ho! You go round the townships in Soweto and you'll really see what is happening. People land in the streets. Starving people. People are crying everywhere. The black-jacks don't care. They come and do their work. They throw everything into the street. And rent is going up, up, up all the time. A few months pass and the insect-like thing, what do you call it? Yes, helicopter throws papers and the children run and grab them. Rent is going up, rent is going up. Where will it all end? (*Shakes his head.*)

When I got my pension, I was sorry. I really felt afraid at what I thought would happen. I felt finished. I had nothing saved, but I had worked all my life, non-stop. I've seen many old people move about picking pieces of paper in the streets. I was afraid of being without work. No pay, nothing every week? I was lucky. My children consoled and comforted me. But one cannot put all your trust in what children promise. Very soon they forget. I knew I would not be able to just sit and do nothing. I would have to go on with something. Maybe selling old used beer bottles and cold drink tins and beer tins, something. With my pension money I bought this Mazda van you see. I paid the deposit three years ago and I am not sorry. It has already paid for itself and I have finished all the credit. The trouble is, you try to do something and everybody starts doing it also. Like the tins. I started a partnership with a friend of mine in Evaton. He knew where they throw away many tins from the workers in these building places. You know, anywhere where men are working in big groups on contract. You know they drink a lot and they throw away the tins and bottles. That friend of mine was the collector. He's got a cart and two horses. He sells wood to the shebeens in the location and they give him tinfuls of 'moroko' (the roughage and

remnants from sifted and strained home-made beer). He then sells the 'moroko' to farmers for feeding cattle and horses. I used to fetch these tins from Evaton and bring them to Industria. We made money. Better than sitting down. We worked and worked. When they advised us to hit them flat, we packed many on the van. We worked and our children could eat. It gave us life. But then, everybody started doing what we were doing. Women and men would come carrying tins in sacks on their heads. The 'dres' (queue) would be *long*. You don't know whether they sleep there or not. You come at 5 in the morning, the 'dres' is long. You come at half-past 4 the 'dres' is long. You come at 4 o'clock still they are already there. Sitting... *(We laugh.)* They sit like this. *(He shuts his eyes, his chin digging into his breast-bone. His lips parted, he snores loudly. I laugh, his barefoot grandchildren kicking a ball on the gravel nearby also giggle and imitate their grandfather.)*

They sit patiently waiting; with blankets wrapped over their heads. Everybody wants to be first when the gates are opened at 8 and the weighing starts.

(I remark: It must have been paying you a lot of money. All that sleeping outside in the open at night and waiting. How much did they pay? He produces a piece of paper.)

What about the vegetables?

— There is a lot of money there. But you have to be 'wake-up'. You must know where to go to. I have been dealing with the boers for a long time. I get to the farm and I shout: 'Moro Baas!' from a long way. I remove my cap and I smile broadly and wave to the 'baas'. If the missus is also there, I know I am lucky. Everything will be alright. I shout: 'Moro Nonnie, moro Au Missus!' Women are the same all over. They have soft hearts. *(I frown and he notices it.)* Yes, yes Ausisi. Even the Boer women. You'll hear her say 'Aubaas daar's skepsel.' Then the baas asks what do I want and I shout: 'Beetroot and mielies, "my baas"!'. Then he calls his African workers to go with me to the part of the farm where they have started picking from. I help them rip off the mielies. I wear my gumboots ready, the ones my son bought for me from the mine compound in Phalaborwa. They are very good. They keep my feet nice and dry. But you know what it is. It is still very early in the morning and the 'serame' (dew) is still hanging in the grass and the mielie stalks and vegetable leaves. My knees get wet and my arms too, but I am a man and I know I am working.

Making food for the children. It gives life. The children eat. Yes Ausisi, after you have sold them you are happy. You have something in your pocket. Same with the 'merogo' (leafy vegetables like beetroot and spinach).

When I get home, I wash off the soil from the beetroot or sometimes carrots when I get them. The kids help me. I go for them very early in the morning. Five in the morning, I am gone. 'Ha ho khomo ea boroko' (literally, 'There's no "sleep-ox"'). You must be 'wake-up', 'wake-up'. I am used to working hard. My old baas can tell you. He used to say it, too. 'When I want good work, I know I must call 'X'. He is my best boy, 'X'.'

Which old Baas?

— At United Tobacco (U.T.C.) where I used to work. I started there in 1929 Ausisi. (*He smiles and looks at me.*) You were not yet born then. You know, I have been driving over 45 years, forty-five years and no accident! How do you like that?

Where did you drive to all that time?

— All over. German Wes, Kimberley, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Cape Town, Durban, Griqua, Messina, Beit Bridge, Rhodesia, Lorenzo Marques, Kolony (Cape), Beira, everywhere. (*He points with his forefinger in all directions.*)

And you drove a car to all those places?

— Yes. I drive. Ausisi. I don't play. Sometimes the salesman, the white man I am taking to these places also drives, and I sit at the back and sleep a bit. But *I* am the driver and he is only a salesman. He is selling. It is my work. He only gives me help to rest. You know Ausisi, all this 'nonsens' about 'parteit' is all... (*curses.*) People are people. He gets lonely and we talk, talk oh, a lot of things.

What?

— Everything. Mostly about women. (*We laugh.*) Women. Just like all men everywhere. He tells me about his girl-friends and asks me whether I have any besides my wife. He asks a lot of questions. Questions like 'How do you do it? How many times in one night ... all that.' (*We laugh.*)

Sometimes when we get to a filling station, he sees a nice woman passing like that one passing there. (*He points at a girl.*) He asks: 'Don't you think she's nice, man. Don't you want to invite her for the night?' They like our women. That white salesman was very good. We were just

like brothers. He still comes to see me sometimes. But now since the fightings in 1976 he has not come. He is afraid. But he does not forget to send me a nice tie or handkerchiefs at Christmas. You know, Ausisi, one time I was very cold and sick. I was just shaking like this (*he shows how he shook*) in the car. He drove all the way from Vereeniging — we were from Port Elizabeth — straight to Soweto. When we got home in Mapetla my wife was surprised to see me escorted by him, covered in the white man's overcoat, over my head like a bride.

(We laugh loudly.)

I used to like travelling with that Baas of mine. But he liked women. Sometimes when we leave Johannesburg, he tells me: 'When we get to Kimberley man, we will rest for two days. But we must be there tonight not too late, we *must*.' When I laugh and ask why, he says: 'I got a woman there. Just make sure we get to so and so hotel tonight eh?' And I laugh and step on the 'fat' (accelerator). Then when we get there 'parteit' starts again. He goes into the nice part of the hotel, and I go to the servants' quarters. Sometimes it is cold and there is no fire in those rooms. All a lot of sh... man!

(I laugh. A long pause. He serves customers who want mielies.)

But it was nice Ausisi. Going everywhere, meeting many people and seeing how they live. Did you know there are people who eat skins?

(I shake my head: 'No.')

I also didn't know that such a thing happened. (*I wince and he repeats.*) Yes, skins, skins. With the hair still on them and all that. They say it is healthy. We went to another part of Swaziland. The people there are still keeping the old habits of eating. They just cook the head of an ox and the trotters just as they are. Skin and all, just like that. And they eat it when cooked. I didn't believe my eyes. They eat it and they enjoy it!

(More customers come. 'There's a lot of business,' I remark.)

Not now. It used to be really good. You know, you have to watch out for the police all the time. See their 'kwela-kwela' from a long way. When they appear, you'll see all those women sitting there roasting mielies on the 'mbaulas' (braziers) scattering in all directions. Then I just get into the van and drive away and the kids jump quickly into the back and cover up the mielies or whatever I am selling with those sacks. (*He points to a bundle of hessian bags next to the mound of green mielies.*)

They don't care. They take the mielies or whatever they get and turn over the braziers so that no selling and roasting can go on. They see it is

useless chasing the sellers. Hei! Ausisi. These women can run, you know? They never know where they vanished to. They see it is useless. When they catch one, they still can't prove *she* was selling or which 'mbaula' belongs to which one of them. So they just turn everything upside-down. Just now, they are really mad. They don't want to see anyone selling. You know what the fine is when they catch you?

(I shake my head.)

Hundred rands! And they want it 'catch' (cash) if not, you're *in*. That is what the sergeant told me. Just now I am looking for a shop. Don't you know of someone who has a shop to hire? I want someone with a licence to help me. We have it tough these days. It's really bad, bad, bad. It's just 'ncha-ncha'. *(Smacks his tongue loudly against his teeth, using an exclamation meaning 'just managing'.)*

It worries me a lot. We used to do a lot of work. *(He shakes his head.)* They always think of some way to get in your way. These Europeans. There's no way of running away from them. I spoke to one coloured policeman to get the sergeant-in-charge at the police-station and he took me right to him. You have to work your way in all the time. *This thing.* *(He rubs his right thumb several times against the forefinger.)* *This thing* is the only thing which works. *Money.* 'Bagolo ba re "Chelete e bula dikgoro"' (the old say 'money opens entrances'). I gave some, but it still didn't work.

How now?

— It's the law, the sergeant kept saying. They (the police) are only helping to clear up the townships. It's actually the health inspectors and the T.P.A. who must do it. He said: 'Even if I allow you to sell man, you'll still be caught and fined. Just try and get a shop. The inspectors also patrol the whole Soweto — not only my men. I'm sorry for you, but I can't help you unless you get a licence and a shop. That's the *law* man.' But anyway the coloured said they would always warn me if they are going to do 'raids' on the hawkers. He said I could sell freely *after 3* in the afternoon — at that time the ones who raid knock off and the whole Soweto is 'free'. But by then, how much have you lost? Too much money. But anyway I stick to that advice. I don't want to pay R100,00. How long does it take to make hundred rands? For a poor struggling man like myself?

Don't you get a pension every month?

— I do. But it is not enough. I still have two children to clothe, feed and

'teach' (educate). All the other six are already working. Four are married. You know what it is. When they grow older and they work, they buy clothes and 'look' (concentrate) at themselves. They don't help you every time. Sometimes they buy you a shirt or a jersey, or they bring you something for the house. You can't force them. They also have their own credits. I'll be happy if I can find a place to sell vegetables and fruits. Even if I must stand on the pavement in front of a shop, I don't mind. Shop rentals are *so* high. I know how to talk to the Boers. I grew up in the farms where we used to be thrashed to do work. I know them. I have many boer friends. You know, there's a kind one in a farm in Zuurbekom who always gives me eggs. Big size eggs cheap, cheap, cheap. He also sells me fowls. He smiles when he sees me and says 'X', I like you because I can trust you. When you don't have cash I give you eggs and I know you will come back and pay me. Everybody is *so* 'skelm'.

(We laugh.)

- Yes, Ausisi. In this work you have to be *a man*. You've got to trust yourself. You see that thing wrapped in newspapers behind my seat there? I've got a long heavy crow-bar. I keep it for 'our children'.

(He smiles and looks at me.)

- The ones who hate waking up in the morning, knocking at a white man's door and saying 'Moro baas!' The ones who wait for Friday and then they rob us. Once I had a nasty experience. They *got* me. I was selling near Kwezi station. I started very early that Friday before others arrived. I was the only one. They came in a group. One came from the front and the others came from my back. I didn't know what to do. But I was brave and I shouted 'What do you want?' They did not answer. The one in front drew a knife from his trouser pocket. A long ugly thing. When I stepped back, the ones behind me grabbed my hands tight behind my back and I couldn't do anything. I tried to kick one, and luckily I got him on the face and he fell back. His knife fell down and I shouted like a woman. Don't laugh Ausisi, there was nothing I could do. They searched my pockets and took all the money I had. The whole seventeen rands. By the time people from the train came to see what was wrong, they were gone. From that day I am always ready. I am always on the look-out who comes near me. You can always see who is full of 'nonsons'. You have to be a man, here, a man....

You Will Never Make Me Leave My Work

Rev. Tsolo speaks to
Miriam Tlali

Ex-priest (Rev.) Tsolo of the African Methodist Church sits basking in the sun outside the house of one of his daughters in Molapo. He remembers his experiences while a young priest in the remote parts of the mountainous Quthing in Lesotho, before an accident which changed his life; his horse slipped and he was thrown over a precipice. This happened in the forties. He has since been living with his daughter in Soweto. He estimates his age to be about 98. He was, together with others, kept in a camp by the British 'to protect them from the Boers' during the Anglo-Boer war. Among the souvenirs he kept from the 'camp' is an old tin-opener and a strong leather and steel purse with circular steel openings where the 'Kruger' coins used to be kept. He used to speak Afrikaans very well, having worked in the Free State as a boy for many years. 'I don't know what happened to my "Se-Buru" (Dutch). I cannot speak it any more,' he says, looking up and smiling.

'I used to be a priest. I used to work for God. Some of the things I experienced would make you have bad dreams at night. Can you believe it when I say because of my faith I used to cross a river by walking on the back of a huge "water-snake" (noha ea metsi)?' (*I smile incredulously and try to conceal my disbelief.*)

'What, a "water-snake"?'

'Yes, yes a water-snake. That's what I said.'

'Where was that? Did you experience that in your sleep or what?'

'Oh. So you think I was dreaming, eh? That's what I hate about you "matsoelopele" (Moderns). Everything you cannot understand is nothing but a dream, a dream.' (*He points to his stiff leg.*)

'It was years, many years before I became like this. Before my leg got injured. Do you know where Quthing is?'

'Yes. Somewhere in Lesotho.'

'Yes, in Quthing. We used to go out preaching. There were two of us. A certain young man and I. We were the only two ordained priests of our church in that whole district. This A.M.E. Church you see comes from very far. We went through very difficult times. The people were

advised against joining it. It was very difficult to persuade the chiefs to give us stands for our church. You had to be either “mo-Fora” (belong to the Paris Missionary Society), “mo-Roma” (Roman Catholic) or “mo-Chache” (Church of England) — only churches led by white people. “Black” churches were persecuted. After a long time we were given a small plot and the conference built a thatched roof church and a priest was stationed there to serve the few converts. (*Pause.*) Oh, but the place was *bad*. But first the two of us lived in caves. We were very very poor. We had nothing but we were real priests. Not these who only bury you if you pay your dues. Between us, we had one old Bible, one jacket, one “bipi” (bib), one “bone-collar” (dog-collar).’ (*I stifle an urge to laugh out loud.*)

‘How was that? How could the two of you have only one of those things? Didn’t you both go out preaching?’

‘We did, bu. we had to go out one at a time because we only had one of those things. We had spent a long time combing the whole mountain area preaching. There was nowhere where we could get those items. We had very little contact with the big circuit which was at Bloemfontein. There was also no money to travel there and the letters were very, very slow. After writing a letter or sending a message you had to wait many months before you got a reply. One had to remain in the cave while the other went out doing God’s work. I had managed to go to a conference at one time and it was there that the presiding elder had passed on to me those articles. They were not easily obtainable at the time.’

‘When was that about, can you remember?’ (*He thinks for a while.*)

‘It was before the “Fourteen” War. I was still a young man. I was not even married yet We lived in caves, my child, *in caves*. We were wanderers. One of us would use the collar above the bib covering only the front of the chest and the worn jacket. No shirt or this thing you wear inside the shirt. This....’

‘Vest?’ (*He nods gratefully.*)

‘Yes, vest.’ (*We both laugh.*)

‘Just the bare back. People would assume that the back was covered of course and not realise that there was nothing there, only the skin.’

‘And trousers, did you have any?’

‘Yes. We had our old heavily-patched khaki pants. They had patches of all colours all over, but they were alright. We only used those on Sundays because we were saving them. During the week we wore “litsheha” (stertriems), and the usual Basotho “mekhahla” (leather

blankets) over them. Every male person wore these so it wasn't funny or surprising.' (*I laugh.*)

'Quthing was a really difficult place. *Difficult.* And the priests used to run away from it. The main thing was the hunger. You know how I was sent there? We were at the Annual Conference and it had been some time that the place was without a priest. Then the Bishop asked why the place was so difficult. Rev. Tantsi ... not this Tantsi who was in Pretoria, his elder brother the big Tantsi. Yes, that one. He stood up and told Bishop that there was only one man who could get that place right. When the Bishop asked "Who's that?" he pointed at me and said: "Tsolo." Then Bishop asked me to stand up so that everybody could see me. He asked me: "Are you willing to go and preach the word of God in Quthing, Reverend Tsolo?" And I answered: "Yes my Lord Bishop. I am willing." Everybody in the hall shook their heads. "Do you think you will be able to put the place in order, my Brother?" And I answered boldly: "I shall do my best, My Lord. I have no choice. I was called to do the work of God and I agreed." Then the Bishop thanked me and said: "God be with you and bless you my Brother in Christ." (*After a long pause, he shakes his head.*)

'When I got there, there was a scorched gown hanging on a nail on the wall in the rondavel next to the church. The rondavel was the mission house. "He-e-e-e ..." The priest who had been there before me had even forgotten it in the flight to disappear from the place.' (*We laugh.*)

'There was an old woman nearby who used to send her grandsons to bring me some "seqhaqhabola" (ground soured mealie porridge — soft) and "maqebekoane" (dumpling). She did not belong to our church but she sympathised because her brother had once been a preacher in the church. The small congregation would attend service on Sunday, and it would end there. They would not bother to give the usual priest's "sapoto" (support). I wondered why until the boys — the old woman's grandsons — divulged the secret to me one night. They said that it had been decided at the beerhouses and other meeting places that since *I* was bold enough to go there, the people would see to it that I starve to death. We were not being paid stipends like priests of other churches; every priest had to depend on his congregation to feed him. So they carried out their pledge.'

'But why? If they were church members, then how did they expect the church to stand?'

'My child, the place was *bad, bad.* They hated me. The old woman I

spoke of would bring me food at night when it was dark, or she would send her children. She later complained that she was doing it at a great risk to herself, children, property and flock. Then I asked her to stop because I pitied her. She had been very kind to me for all that time. I stayed without food. I only drank black coffee which I had with me in a little sack. I drank it until it made me sick sometimes. I think it is alright, but it has to be supported by something in the stomach. Later, one day, I wandered away from the mission-house, in the direction of the house of one of the women of our church with the hope of getting some food. From a distance, I could see her stoking fire below a big "drie-voet" iron pot. She must have seen me approach because the next moment when I looked that way she had vanished. I got to the pot which was full of simmering "setoto" (a corn brew of soft malt porridge). I took a mug nearby and scooped a few times some of the pink porridge and drank it. I did not bother to find out where the woman was. That "forage" sustained me until the end of the week. I was determined to make them see that I was not going to give in so easily. I prepared a sermon for them. And they *came* to church, perhaps to hear whether I would tell them I was leaving. They were *many* that day.'

'But why did they hate you so much?'

'My child, there are places where this drinking of liquor can drive people to do most horrible deeds indeed. Quthing was such a place. It was like Sodom and Gomorah. They used to drink heavily — men, women and children alike. They would swear, murder and steal. Adultery and concubinage were very common. And now I used to remonstrate against such practices. Every Sunday I preached disuasive sermons and they did not like it. That Sunday I preached and said: I've noticed that you are determined to starve me, my children. I even went over to another house and without the owner's permission, drank some of her "beer" soft porridge. I did that to get strength to be here today. Let me tell you this. I have been a priest for many years. It is not hunger which will make me leave this work of God. You *will* perhaps be able to make me starve to death. But when I lie dead, you will still have my corpse to dispose of, in spite of your hatred of me. You will have to touch my corpse and bury it. If you do not do that, my corpse will smell. It will *stink* on your nostrils until you bury it. Otherwise you will never make me leave my work. I was not given this gift by you. God gave it to me. I shall read you from the Holy Bible — Revelation Chapter 3 verse 11: "Boloka seo u nang le sona, e mobe a tle a se ke a u amoha moqhaka oa

hao” — *Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. I screamed.* At the top of my voice. Loudly: I repeated the verse again and again, *screaming. Shouting!* And they fell. Sobbing women came towards the pulpit covering their faces and crying. Others swooned as I shouted. Some men also came and knelt near me and prayed unashamedly. Those who were shy to cry before women walked out of the church and wiped the tears off their faces outside. My child, I tell you it was a real scene. Then we all knelt and prayed together.

‘From that day on, I never knew starvation. That is what faith does. Shortly afterwards, the chief, who was a non-believer and a drunkard, became seriously ill and from his sick-bed he called out at night: “Go and call me Tsolo.... Call me Reverend Tsolo to come and pray for me!” And I did. When he was well again, he stopped drinking. He never accepted the Christian religion, he despised it because he claimed it would make us “soft”. But he advised those who wanted to accept this faith to join *our* church — the “Black” church. *(It was time to go. I reminded the Reverend that he had not told me how he crossed ‘Sengu’ (The Orange River) on the back of the water-snake.)*

‘Oh, *that*. You know, all the time I thought I was walking on shiny pebbles which lay at an angle across the river. I did not see that they were actually shiny hard scales on the skin of a huge snake. It was only after I had crossed and was standing on the opposite bank that I heard voices of men who were standing near a small skiff. They had apparently been standing there holding their breaths and looking at me walking in front of my horse and leading the way on what I thought was soil. They pointed at the part I had walked on and I heard that sound of a strong torrent of water flowing and the colossal creature below sinking slowly.’

Kippie's Memories and the Early Days of Jazz

Kippie Moeketsi speaks

In my family we were musically inclined. My brother, Jacob, is a pianist — he was taught by a white woman. Father played the organ and mother would sing hymns. The whole family was like that. It is only my sister who was not into music. I took up music at twenty and taught myself to read it. My late brother, Andrew, used to sing bo-Itchi Mama, old harmony songs.

Every time I saw him I would ask: 'Kana, tell me, man. How do I know the clarinet keyboard? Where must I place my fingers?'

He would shout at me, 'Hai, no. Put your fingers there!'

Then I would ask again, 'What is a crotchet?'

He would say, 'Aga man, you're worrying me. It's a beat.'

And from there I had to see to it myself. I had to find out on my own what a crotchet was. He left me there!

I also read music books. I would say it is the Ortolandi that taught me music. I learnt to play the clarinet with a saxophone book. 'Strue, that's how I taught myself music. I can still play the clarinet. I didn't practise how to play the saxophone, I just play it. Yah, once you know a clarinet, a saxophone is a boy.

The first group I played with, 'The Band In Blues', broke up firstly because I didn't want to play in Denver, esidigidigini. The other guys liked to play at the Jorissen Centre and other such places.

In those days the tsotsis were rough. Musicians used to get a hiding from them now and then. They would say to us that we were thinking that we are clever, and better than them.

Sometimes we would play from 8.00 p.m. to 4.00 a.m. nonstop. It was like that. Sometimes the tsotsis would force us to play right through up to 9.00 a.m. By force! We played all the songs they wanted.

I remember one incident in which I managed to escape with my dear life. It was in '48 when we were still playing at the Bantu Men's Social Centre. Tsotsis came, man. There were about seventeen, carrying tomahawks, and chopping everybody in the hall for no reason. After they had finished with the audience, they came onto the stage while we stood glued there, frightened.

They then began chopping up our instruments and just then we ran for our lives with the thugs in hot pursuit. One of them chased me down Von Wielligh Street. It was about three o'clock in the morning. He shouted at me, 'Kom hier, jong, Kippie!' His name was Seven. Fortunately for me, a police van appeared and the thug disappeared. The tsotsis were attacking us for the fun of it. They were from Alexandra township. I think it was not yet the Spoilers; it was before their time. Yah, musicians used to have a tough time during those days.

After the band broke I joined the Harlem Swingsters in 1949. We had chaps like Gwigwi Mrwebi, Skip Phahlane, Ntemi Piliso, Randolph Tai Shomang, Norman Martin (if I'm not wrong) and Todd Matshikiza. Sadly, the majority of the guys are all dead.

Those olden days, you wouldn't play in a band if you could not read music. Unlike today, where you just play. That's why I don't like today's music. I don't say I'm condemning it. I don't say it is backward. In fact, some of today's musicians are good. The trouble with them is that they are too commercial. The talent scout tells them, 'Don't play jazz because the audience don't like it.' You understand what I'm trying to say?

A year after I had joined the Harlem Swingsters, the band broke up. Really, there were no reasons, except for financial difficulties.

In those days, big bands didn't make sufficient money. Yet, those were the days of the best big bands in the country — Jazz Maniacs, Swingsters, Merry Blackbirds, Rhythm Clouds and African Hellenics.

General Duze, Boykie Gwele and Mzala Lepere — I don't know who was the drummer at the time — they made a quartet accompanying the Manhattan Brothers. Duze said I should come and join them soon after the Swingsters disbanded.

I really enjoyed my long stay with The Manhattans (who were THE group at the time), as a member of the backing band called the Shantytown Sextet. Oh well, we did fine some way or the other with our accompaniment.

I think the money was coming in okay — for me personally, and I got better money as we used to perform regularly, all over. Springs, Pretoria, Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom, Nigel and places like that.

We went on playing and then the late saxophonist Mackay Davashe joined us. I think, in 1951. Then Davashe later became our leader, I don't remember how. Dambuza Mdledle was also our leader at one time.

But when we went to Cape Town, we found ourselves stranded, though the Manhattans were a big name.

We left for Langa location in Cape Town, playing to nearly empty halls. At one juncture, people started throwing stones on the roof of the hall while we were playing inside. Hey, it was terrible!

The people of Langa said we were playing 'nonsense'. Manhattan Brothers and all. They said we were playing the same kind of music the Mannhattans always played. They wanted something new.

A Chap Called Dollar Brand

During the confusion, Todd Matshikiza disappeared from the cast!

And that's how we got a replacement on piano, a chap called Dollar Brand, from District Six.

I don't know how they got Dollar Brand, only Dambuza ... he came with Dollar while we were at a hostel staying in Langa, stranded.

Dambuza came to me and asked me, 'Do you know this guy?' meaning Dollar. I replied, Yah, this guy I know ... I saw him once at Rio Bioscope in Johannesburg, playing at a concert with me and Gene Williams who was leaving for Germany. 'Yah, I know this boy.' Yes, Dollar was still a boy at that time.

'Can he play piano?' asked Dambuza. I replied: 'I think he is capable.' Dambuza then said: 'Okay, let's take him.'

Dollar was scared of us. He was kneeling down, virtually begging us, man. I'm telling you. This Dollar Brand — things do happen, 'strue's God.

He wore big boots, looking like a skollie-nyana so-oo. Kante the chap is a good musician.

Hai, we took a train, the whole cast, to Port Elizabeth.

At that time nobody was aware that I had a lot of money with me then, because I used to sneak out every night to play at a certain nightclub. The chap who got me this private job is one of the finest guitarists we've ever had — Kenny Just.

I got ten pounds a night — which was quite a lot at that time — and used to make it a point that the other guys shouldn't know about this. When I ended my stint after a week, Kenny gave me a bottle of whisky and hotel remnants - chicken, sandwiches and things of that nature.

That's also when I started to be a buddy with Dollar.

It was in P.E. that we made a departure in our music. We said 'Now we are not going to play English music any more. We are going to play indigenous music — Xhosa, Sesotho and all that.'

Who came with this idea? It was Davashe and Dambuza.

You know what was the cause of all this? It is because of the reaction of the audiences in Cape Town where we didn't have a following. So, we got a stoke somehow or the other, that no, man, this (English) music, people are bored with it and we'll have to change it.

Change we did, yah. We could read and write music but were doing it all by ear — quickly. You know, African music is easy, and we didn't bother writing it down. All we did was to write down the keys; the melody line and tune, that's all. Afterwards we would arrange it our own way.

King's Holiday

By the way, this show of ours was named 'King's Holiday' — by Dambuza — because we were then living like kings, enjoying life and eating the money. In East London, we played to packed houses for one and a half months.

We stayed in that area for two months, having parties every night after the show! We had made about a thousand pounds which made us feel really good for the cost of living was still low at that time.

Each member got sixty pounds as pocket money, but hey, when we went to Queenstown, none of us had a penny on himself. All we had were our train tickets.

We had lived up to the name of the show — King's Holiday. Dambuza came with all this idea, I'm telling you. Dollar was still with us. He was a small boy then, 'yes, sir' boy.

We stayed for about a week in Queenstown and spent all the money we had earned, and went back home broke. I'm telling: no penny, no provision. Dollar also returned to District Six.

'Miriam — That Girl Had No Curves'

A week after we arrived from the Cape, we went to play in Springs, and the pay I got there was the first that I was able to give to my mother.

Mzala Lepere played bass, Norman Martin returned to play drums and General Duze featured on guitar.

Dambuza Mdledle, leader of the Manhattans, one day said: 'Hey, gents, there is a girl who is singing with the Cuban Brothers. I don't know how I can remove her from them....'

That time, the only female singer with the Cuban Brothers was not known. She was nothing, man. She was just another girl who was trying to sing.

'How can we get her? She is a good singer,' Tapyt said, 'I heard her singing at DOCC in Orlando East the other day!'

We coolly said, 'Naw, man, just bribe her with some money. Call her to a corner and talk to her ma-private It does not matter even if you give her a pound....'

I don't know how Dambuza solved that, but after a few days, we saw him come with this girl who was singing with the Cuban Brothers. Just like that.

She had joined the Manhattan Brothers. Her name was Miriam Makeba. And it was with the Manhattans that she began to be noticed. To tell the truth, the Manhattans made Miriam famous. In those days, the Manhattans and Inkspots were the best groups.

When I say Miriam was made famous by the Manhattans, I don't mean they taught her to sing As an individual, Miriam was shy and really scared of us. Oh, she was....

Well, the three of us — me, Mackay Davashe and herself, we used to sit down and practise — sometimes we would tell her how to use her voice; how to improve her vocal chords and all that jazz. And Miriam would listen attentively.

Before she became the famous Miriam Makeba she is today. You know, I must admit, I never thought Miriam would become what she is now. What I mean is this; at Orlando township while she was with the Cuban Brothers, I thought 'Ag, she'll never make it big.'

I thought she would never make our standards — you know we regarded ourselves then as the big-shots. We thought we were The Guys, if you understand what I'm trying to say. I regarded the Cuban Brothers and Miriam as small-fry, let me put it that way.

They were not bad, on the other hand, because they in fact started close harmonies in this country, based on the American group, the Modernnaires.

To me, Miriam was just an ordinary girl — a novice. Ons was die ouens then — the real guys — thing of that nature. You'll forgive me for my English.

Miriam was not that attractive — I mean, curves and all that jazz. I think our first concert with Miriam was somewhere in the East Rand — singing negro spirituals, you know. But still, I was not yet impressed,

maybe because I was so influenced by this Negro guy — Charlie ‘Bird’ Parker.

Awright, we toured the Free State, Cape and Natal with Miriam. Before the show, Davashe and I would test her vocal chords, advising her here and there, and she would listen. Because, during my schooldays I used to be a singer — yah ... with Duze, we would tap-dance. My teacher, Mr Ramokgopa, liked singing and he formed the group Lo-Six.

I came with a composition from the Chesa Ramblers band in Germiston — boSipho, bo mang-mang. Gange yaGermiston. Their song was ‘Saduva’. That later became our closing song in our concerts.

Yah, at 4 a.m. before playing the national anthem, ‘Nkosi Sikelel’iAfrika’, we would play ‘Saduva’ when we’d know it’s chaile — closing time. It is this song ‘Saduva’ which really gave Miriam a boost because at that time, Dolly Rathebe was the number one girl singer.

When Miriam got onto the stage with the Manhattans, singing this song, she got the crowds raving. In those days we dressed smart — the guys with suits and bowties and Miriam wearing long evening dresses.

We played with her for a long time, until she left us and joined Alf Herbert’s African Jazz. She was by now involved romantically with Sonny Pillay, who himself was a good singer.

The Coming of King Kong

Then came this guy Spike Glasser, a lecturer in music at the University of Cape Town. Kante all the time Todd Matshikiza was writing the score for a musical while he was performing with us.

We were playing songs from the musical unawares — and I can remember well how we used to play the very overture from the musical — King Kong — at the Selbourne Hall. We were three then — Todd, General and me, at variety concerts.

Spike Glasser came to us with his wife at Dorkay House, where we were all introduced. We were told he was from overseas and all that jazz.

We didn’t know he was a local guy — you know we suffer from this complex that whenever a man is from overseas he’s the end in life. ‘There’s nothing better than a man from overseas! Ha! ha!’

You know, daai gedagte — that kind of impression. Monna ga bare o tswa overseas ra mo sheba, man. Ra mo tshaba — when a man is from overseas, we admire him. We are scared of him!

Yah, Glasser, an M.A. in music from Cambridge University in England, that guy. Musically-speaking, the guy was there, if you know what I mean. He came with some musical scores — aga man, I was just a scrappikkie of a laaitie then. Wearing my ysterbaadjie and my Hong Kong suit which was rather too tight on me.

Awright, present were the usual Dorkay crowd — bo-Mackay Davashe; Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, whom again? I think others like Todd Matshikiza and the late clarinetist Gwigwi Mrwebi. Then Glasser went away, returned some weeks later and chose me, Davashe and Sol to assist him to arrange the music of the King Kong show.

We sat with Glasser for a coupla months — I think two months if I'm not wrong — arranging the score, at Dorkay. At times we would go to Glasser's home in Orange Grove or Yeoville, spend some nights there. Or, go back home in the early hours of the morning at about three o'clock — with a bottle of whisky! This was to keep stimulating us, let me put it that way.

First stage rehearsals! Miriam Makeba was one of the leading characters together with Dambuza Mdledle playing the part of King Kong himself.

Really, I didn't concentrate on the play which was by Harry Bloom. Glasser, a jolly guy, not pompous, was the musical director and Leon Gluckman was the director of the whole show.

There I began to realise that this girl — Miriam — can sing!

I said, haw - I nudged Davashe during one of the rehearsals, do you hear what I'm hearing, Mac? This girl! Huh! We performed for some time with Miriam then poof! — she's now up there.

Our opening night of the show at the Wits Great Hall had been fantastic — Oh, God, the reception was wonderful, man.

I then realised that, heh, this Miriam Makeba — she's so clever this cherrie ... klaar, klaar, she had recorded the song 'Lo-Six', the one she had been singing with the Manhattans. We had some professional jealousy. We toured the Cape and Natal with the King Kong show — I think in Cape Town we played to mixed audiences. At the Great Hall I could not see the audience because I was in the orchestra's pit.

It was not very long after Miriam had left for America, Masekela followed also — before the show went to London. Abigail Kubheka was Miriam's under-study — the script and the music.

I went to London a month after the whole cast had left because I had been hospitalised after an assault.

In London, I had to audition for my previous place in the orchestra! About a month after my arrival in London, something happened to my brain. I became berserk and had to be taken to a mental asylum in London — Ferreira Hospital.

Hah, I had to leave the King Kong show. A substitute was found - a white guy took my place.

I stayed for a month in the hospital. Then, one day one of the doctors took me to a concert in London where pianist Oscar Peterson and Trio were playing, including Ella Fitzgerald and her group.

I sat there, you know (the doctor wanted to find out whether I'm awright, because they suspected I thought too much, musically, if you understand what I mean). They thought that my liking of music could have been one of the causes of my sudden illness that made me not to be quite normal.

Okay, I went to the concert. Well, I was normal then, you know But when Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown (on bass) and Ed Thigpen (on drums) started playing there, I felt like standing and jumping, things of that nature. The doctor said, 'Sit down, sit down, Kippie!'

Hey, this Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen. Man they were playing very well!

Second half, came Ella Fitzgerald and her group and the same thing happened. Ella was gone! With Herb Ellis (on guitar) and the other guys — one white and two negroes. I can't remember their names.

After the show, I got an autograph from Ella.

And from there, the doctor said to me, 'No, Kippie, I think you're still not awright. You'll have to stay another two weeks in the hospital.' After the two weeks, I was discharged, having been given treatment — like electric shock — three times. That thing can make you stupid, man.

It makes you to become forgetful. Even now, I'm like that — forgetful. I have this tendency of forgetting things — I can hold a pen and forget where I have put it.

But the doctor said it would do me good. He told me that if one nerve in my brain snapped, I had had it and would eventually become insane, if I kept on thinking too much about music. He said electric shock treatment was the best for me.

Afterwards, I went to this place — I forget it, man ... Newport Hotel ... there I met Jonas Gwangwa and the other cast members of King Kong. By the way, the doctor had told me not to booze, but all the same I drank though the doctor had said, 'If you drink, you'll die.'

Back Home

Those who returned to South Africa with me were Mackay Davashe and Abigail Kubheka, while several others remained in London.

I had to come back home because I could no longer stomach it in London. Oh well, a week after my arrival, I went to Dorkay House where Mr Ian Bernhardt began to run musical shows for some of us there — including the late pianist, Gideon Nxumalo. We played at City Hall, Selbourne Hall and some nightclubs here and there. I would say, he was a born musician, though he was much more into classic music, yah. But he was a master — he could read and write music well. He could handle that instrument of his!

Oh yah, I remember so clearly now moments in what I believe was the best small band in the country — Jazz Epistles, featuring Dollar Brand on piano, Hugh Masekela on trumpet, Jonas Gwangwa on trombone, and Makhaya Ntshoko on drums, and me on alto saxophone.

I now recall ‘Scullery Department’, which I composed and recorded on our first album, Jazz Epistles Volume One.

We were playing at a certain nightclub in Johannesburg. During a musical break, we were taken to the kitchen to have our meal. Yah, we sat down in that kitchen, eating.

Then I said, ‘By right, you know Dollar, this is all nonsense — this idea of us being taken into the kitchen when there’s a break.’

I further said to the guys: ‘Are we kitchen “boys”. Aren’t we here to entertain the people? Aren’t we the “thing” here?’

Dollar replied in a soft and skollie-like voice: ‘Ja, man, jy praat die waarheid ou pellie.’

There and then I started to think of a song ... to remember the kitchen incident by, but I didn’t think in terms of the word scullery. It was suggested by Dollar.

He said, ‘Ja, ou pellie, ons kom nou en dan by die kombuis ... the scullery department.’

And that’s how that song was born, because I said to the guys. ‘Yes, I should write a song called “Scullery Department”!’

After discussing this, we immediately called the son of the owner of the nightclub into the kitchen and told him:

‘Look here pellie, it is not good this thing of you bringing us into the kitchen for our meal. You’d better see that we get our own table right

there among the customers. We're also important in this whole affair, you know?

'In fact, we ARE the thing here! And do you know, if it were not for us, we're telling you you'd have no business.'

'But you know chaps, my licence,' he replied.

We answered back: 'Your licence? Why don't they stop us playing in front of whites?'

After that, he went away — and set a table for us right among the customers!

The Jazz Epistles was the best band I ever played in, here in South Africa.

The Widow of Phokeng

Based on an interview with Mrs S. by
Mmantho Nkotsoe

This is the story of an old 'Mayibuye' woman, a fighting woman who was in the Anti-Pass campaign and in the bus and potato boycotts; who marched on Pretoria's Union Buildings singing 'Nkosi Sikelele' and 'Verwoerd, bula teronko'; who attended early-morning strike meetings in Alexandra's Number Three Square, and got to know the inside of 'Number Four' (Johannesburg Fort Prison). Her three decades in Alexandra (1930-1962) were the years that saw the emergence of mass-based urban political movements, and the lawyer who defended her in court at the time of the anti-pass campaign was none other than the young Nelson Mandela.

These, however, were not the only events in the life of Mrs S, the widow of Phokeng. There were also times when she was unable to link arms with other militants and continued the fight on the battleground of her own life. It is possible that what she learned there will be as useful to others as what she learned in the arena of 'The Struggle'. When she was setting down the thoughts on which this story is based she said, 'I was very unfortunate to be born into a family where there were no grandparents who could sit down with me and tell me about their ancestors.' What can we say to her if not, 'Grandmother, sit down and tell'?

Life in Phokeng

She will tell us, for instance, why as a young woman 'not yet twenty' she left the village of her birth, Phokeng.

'Girls of my age were working in Jo'burg. I couldn't just till the land, unmarried as I was. There was nothing I could do with the bags of mabele I could get from the fields, since I had no children. I looked down on the idea of going to the fields, young as I was.'

The village of Phokeng is the heartland of the Tswana-speaking Bafokeng people. It lies a few kilometres north-west of Rustenburg, and just to the

east of the Magaliesberg. The mountains bend northward at Olifantshoek to form one end of the bow which the whole range resembles. It is as if the people behind the Magaliesberg were sheltered to some degree by this bulwark of sandstone and quartz that lies between them and the Rand. The process of rural disintegration so familiar in the rest of the countryside advanced more slowly here. Although her father had died young, the mother of the widow of Phokeng had fields at Kanana which the children helped her to till. During the season of cultivation they would go and live in small, rudimentary huts 'until the hoeing was over'. Since other people came to Kanana to cultivate the fields adjacent to theirs, they did not lack company.

The Phokeng mine began to cast a shadow over these fields. Dumps encroached on what had been agricultural land, and Mrs S speaks of 'the mineworkers' with some hostility. 'They kill people out in the fields.' In her story we do not see their faces or learn anything about the circumstances of their lives. They are groups of men moving through fields of *mielies* and *mabela*, reaping where they did not sow, a constant source of danger to the women working in the fields.

The mine belongs to the Bafokeng people. Mrs S, however, does not feel she has a share in it. She resents the seemingly high-handed way in which the chief disposes of the revenue from the mine. She is prepared to believe that the money is being spent on laudable projects like schools, but it is a sore point that 'we do not have direct control over the money'. Nor, one imagines, over who gets to work in the mine, or over wages and conditions of work. A source of wealth to the people, the mine squats over their lives. The men who help to make that wealth terrorise the 'owners' in their fields. This Phokeng mine is one of the few assets of 'independent' Bophuthatswana

Golden City Sisters

She left Phokeng at the end of the Twenties, travelling the first stage of her journey by ox-wagon to Rustenburg: 'We used to ask a lift from people on ox-wagons going to the mill in town.' From Rustenburg she took a train to Pretoria, and another train from there to the Golden City's Park Station. 'There were no taxis. Blacks did not have cars, train was the only means of transport.' Arriving at Park Station she set out to find the brother who was her key to the door of Egoli. He was working at Stanley's Dairy in the white suburb of Parkview, still semi-rural then.

She asked her way there and found it easily enough. The brother took her to a woman relative who was already employed as a domestic worker. Her relative 'kept her ear to the ground' and gave directions which enabled her to penetrate what seemed a maze of streets, hunting a job.

In the end the network of kinswomen and friends found her the opening that confirmed her presence among them as an independent person. She went to one of the lonely rooms that linked into the chain, winding through the suburban maze, of sisters in similar rooms. 'The housemaids protest they cannot be expected to run the risk of sleeping alone,' writes Modikwe Dikobe of a situation like hers. If she was 'without a man companion, a master did or could demand sexual intercourse'. The widow of Phokeng presents a different perspective of what could still be the same backyard.

'We used to enjoy working as domestic servants because we paid each other visits. We had boyfriends but we didn't want them to sleep in our rooms. Whenever one of us knew that her boyfriend would be likely to pay her a visit, she would organise her friends to come and spend the evening with her so that the boyfriend would be inconvenienced.'

What was the idea behind all that?

'It was to make it impossible for the boyfriend to sleep with his girlfriend and to prevent pregnancy in a way. One would sometimes find ten people sleeping in one room.'

Marriage

There was a boyfriend. Maybe she ran out of visitors to ask around when he came. Or — to judge from what she tells us of the life with him that followed — maybe she knew that he was the one who counted. When pressed to explain why she left the world of the 'live-in' domestic servant she tells us first that 'I was married already and I had to have children,' then that 'I left the suburbs when I had fallen pregnant. My fiancé then looked for a room to rent in Alexandra.'

Dikobe's testimony:

**Marriages in town were very rare.
In Doornfontein there were few who had married in any form.
It was 'vat en sit'.**

The couple were living a common-law life. Their affair began in the backyard of the woman's employer while she was living as a domestic servant. She fell pregnant and left for home. From there she wrote unreplyed letters. Returned to find her man little concerned. She persuaded him to hire a room.

The couple could not raise enough money for bogadi. Cattle had decreased and the man's parents were too poor to meet the required number of cattle. A native commissioner's certificate did not qualify them. According to custom they were unmarried.

A home was made of a father, mother and a child. Other children, if there were any, were with the grandparents at their mother's home.

The children belong to the woman's family.

A genuine family unit was broken down by labour recruitment.

Women found marriage very scarce.

The married life of Mrs S seems to have been like this in some ways, and different in others.

Did you celebrate your wedding here in Phokeng?

'No, in Johannesburg.'

We are not told whether this couple raised enough for bogadi, only that they were poor. We know that amicable relations were maintained with both his and her families (widowed mothers in both cases) and that all the children (there were six from eight pregnancies, but one died in childhood, leaving five of whom three are still alive) lived with the parents in Alexandra.

'We used to pay £1 a month for a two-roomed house. Alexandra was a very good place for poor people. We used to love it for that.'

From time to time she would send her mother-in-law £5. This old lady, who survived the widow's own mother, lived not far from Phokeng, at Dinokana. Dikobe tells us that most marriages at this time were between couples who hailed from the same area. 'Marriage between Zulu and Tswana was abhorred. Even between Tswanas of different areas.'

Alexandra Days

The first plots were sold to Africans in Alexandra in 1912. The widow of Phokeng and the township were thus of an age. In the Thirties, Forties

and Fifties things happened which were decisive for the identities of both the place and the woman. From the late Thirties through to the early Fifties a flood-tide of black South Africans was sweeping from the land into the cities — particularly the manufacturing centres. The society, the economy, and politics were being transformed. Alexandra was one of the stomachs in which the lives of people like Mrs S and her husband were digested. As well as people from all parts of the countryside there were those who came on to Alex after the slumyard clearances, or in order to escape regulations in the townships under municipal control. Like Alex, Sophiatown and Western Native Township were bulging at the seams.

‘Almost all youngsters who went to Sophiatown on their arrival from the villages would finally get a “pass” in Alexandra. It was very simple to get a pass. All we had to do was to go with the boy to the Health Committee officer. Then we had to introduce him to the Committee which gave him a “pass” without any fuss. It was very easy. The only document I had to take along to the office was the receipt I was issued with when paying rent.’

In the days when Doornfontein was being cleared a ‘Marabi’ piano-player named Ernest Mochumi had to turn to the trumpet for a living. But his music lived on in exile, in Alex. Mr Masonte’s bicycle shop moved out there, and so did Moloto the herbalist. Mrs S didn’t go to Marabi parties, didn’t join a dance club, and rather regrets that she didn’t queue for ‘bioscope’ with her sister, who would go to the cinema whenever she came on a visit from Phokeng, and return ‘with stories about thieves shooting one another’. You didn’t need to go to the movies to see that. The Americans and the Spoilers regularly came over from Sophiatown ‘to wake up Alexandra gangsters’. Their big cars pitched and rolled in the potholed streets, an armada parading with provocative slowness, every window rolled down and bristling with guns.

Apple Sellers

She hadn’t entirely left white suburbia, going across to Dunkeld to do washing though she wasn’t registered to work. At home she was making clothes at weekends. On Friday or Saturday night she’d do the cutting. Early next morning she’d sit down at her sewing machine and spend that day finishing the dresses, bonnets and aprons that she made. Then she

broke into apple-selling. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were her laundry days, so this new sideline occupied Thursday and Friday, sometimes Saturday. It meant journeying into the centre of Johannesburg, and widening her horizons in other ways. Just as the sisters in Parkview had helped her to begin as a domestic worker, so another group of women brought her into apple-selling.

'I used to go sell apples with a group of women from Bethanie — a village near Brits. They are the ones who introduced me into that business of selling apples, mangoes and other fruits. Do you know where Market and Commissioner Streets are? We used to sit down on the pavement with big bales of fruit beside us.'

It is possible that these women had broken a long-standing taboo on street-selling among Tswana people.

'Yes, it was scandalous among Tswanas to listen to people saying: "I have seen so-and-so's mother selling fruits or vegetables in the street." When I started selling in town, I had to sit down and think before I could venture into that business.'

Stokvel

As well as her contacts with domestic workers, the Bethanie apple-sellers and the dressmaking clientele, Mrs S participated over the years in many 'stokvel' groups. There were usually between eight and ten members, each paying a weekly contribution of about R5. The benefit rotated, and every member could look forward to a windfall about six times a year. The stokvel was also an emergency fund that members could turn to in times of need.

Msomi Nights

No event in her life illustrates the storytelling skill of the widow of Phokeng better than the time her house was raided by Alexandra's dreaded Msomi gang. Like all good storytellers she is able to identify the single incident on which the whole story turns. As is often the case, that incident contains an element of surprise, while the reader (or listener) is left to provide his or her own explanation of the turn the story has taken.

'I think it was in 1939 if I am not mistaken. It happened while we were sleeping. I said to my husband: "I hear some voices outside." He dismissed the topic and said that there was no one outside, I was just imagining. The next thing, we heard a very loud knock at the door. I knew immediately that it was that gang. They had come to kill us. We woke up and tried to hold the door very firm. We did not have expensive furniture because the idea of building a house here in Phokeng had always been in our minds. I therefore thought that they would kill us because we had no furniture to give them and save our lives with. The house was also too small, we didn't have enough space for our furniture. We held the door very firmly, my husband and I, but the people outside were very powerful, they were pushing it from outside. I tried to scream for help but people were asleep already. No one came to our rescue. Then they broke the window, the wooden window frame was also broken into pieces, leaving behind a very big opening. I looked at the window for anyone who could force his way through it. My attention was drawn to that window. We heard one of them saying: "Get in through that window." When he landed inside, he found me ready for him. I pushed him around, trying to burn his hand on the hot stove. He jumped, but my nails still held at his throat. I did not know how strong I was until that night. During the struggle I prayed to God that He should accept our souls because it was clear that they were going to overpower us eventually. I gathered strength and told myself that I had to open the door, no matter what happened. I left that man on the floor, pushed my husband away from the door and swung it open. I said: 'People, why do you want to kill us?' One of them said to the others, "Let's go." They left us without any problem. Just those words, "What do you want?" made them change their minds. It saved my life.

Now after that Msomi gang affair, we decided not to report the case. I was not hurt during the struggle; my husband's finger got hurt in the struggle but it was not serious. One night I had a dream and in that dream, someone advised me to go and report the case to the police but I didn't do that. I had no time to go there. Now one of those guys came to our house one day. Before that boy could enter into the house I had a vision in which that boy appeared to be one of those people who broke into our house. That boy stood at the door, he was hesitant about entering into the house. He couldn't even look at me. I then asked: "What do you want here, can I help you?" He

said that he was looking for a man by the name of Moatshe. I looked at him very closely and saw that he was wearing the same clothes he had on during that terrible night. My neighbour knew the boy and she told me that he was not living far from our place.'

Was he a local person?

'Yes, he was. I did go to his place but I could not find him. They told me that he was a robber and went out at night in most cases. I left a message that he should pay for my broken window but he never turned up to pay for it.'

Bread of Life

Listen carefully to what the widow of Phokeng says on the subject of food and you seem to hear, in a few sentences, the story of her life. From her childhood comes the story of the making of 'matabelekwane', a home-made bread. Mabele meal was ground with warm water, to which a pinch of salt was added, then a small quantity of bread flour. This bread flour was made from 'diara', the leavings of the reaping machine in the wheat fields of Brits. Her mother would travel there with a party of people from Phokeng to glean the harvest. They threshed the wheat in Brits, bringing home full bags. Ground in the local mill, the bread flour would be stored in the house, ready to be used whenever matabelekwane was made.

'I always look at my grandchildren with sympathy because I know that it is not possible to give them good food we used to eat when we were still young....'

In Alexandra, too, her family ate well. She laughs as she tells us that

'I used to like well-prepared food. Even on Saturdays I would go personally to the butchery to look for tasty meat. Under normal circumstances I would buy short-rib. I never made a mistake of leaving out potatoes and rice. I would fry cabbage mixed with potatoes and put in marrow-bones to make it tastier'.

Here is an old lady whose appetite is still good, who still enjoys eating. She has lived through rising prices and a decline in the quality of cooking.

'Food was not expensive, my child, we could buy a bag of maize meal at about 25c, a bag which I think was about 25kg in weight. Meat was also cheap, at one shilling one could fill up a saucepan. Things have gone expensive nowadays. Whenever I visit Johannesburg I make sure that I go there having enough money. I am used to sending children to buy me things like onions, tomatoes and meat in order to have something to eat during the day.

It is only now that I tolerate badly prepared food. (Laughter) Nowadays I eat everything that you children cook. My children are fond of complaining about the food that my grandchildren cook. Just cook whichever way, as long as what you have cooked is edible.'

Potatoes

In the Alexandra days she was very fond of potatoes. She would buy five shillings worth at a time from the women selling at the bus terminus, who were in turn buying from the Italians. But there came a time, in 1959, when she and many others (including some whites, she heard) stopped eating potatoes. Listening to her tell this story we cannot doubt that in South Africa we are living through an epic of resistance. Survival and sacrifice — the two great themes of this epic — became so fused in the popular imagination that it seemed as if eating potatoes would be an act of cannibalism. Men were dying on those potato farms!

'Rumour had it that the Boer who farmed with potatoes had the habit of knocking down his "lazy" labourers with his tractor. He did not bury them, instead he used them as compost in his potato farm. We were convinced that what we heard was true because even the potatoes themselves were shaped like human beings. In every township, potatoes were boycotted. We argued that eating potatoes was the same as eating human flesh.'

Passes

Now Granny, were you still at Alexandra during the pass campaign?
Yes.

What happened?

Women refused to apply for passes because they argued that they too

would have to be registered when employed somewhere. Were they telling lies?

No, they were not.

That's right. We tried to avoid some of those problems that you people are faced with when looking for a job. But it worked out to be a futile attempt. Some of us were imprisoned. Were those women who staged a protest against passes crazy?

Women only?

Men also were in the struggle but women were in large numbers as compared to men. My child, we really protested against passes and ended up at No.4.

Did you reach No.4 also?

Jesus! I did. We resolved that we were not going to apply for passes. Then we started singing:

Hei, Verwoerd, hei bula teronko

Hei, thina si zo ngena zimankosikaze

MaZulu, MaXhosa, Sotho, Shangana!

(Hey! Verwoerd, hey! Open up the prison cells. Hey! we are women, we are going to enter therein. We are Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Shangaan!)

I started to realise that women are militant sometimes. Pedi, Shangaan, Xhosa, we got into police vans, all of us. We started singing our 'Verwoerd' song even behind bars. Whites lost hope of ever being able to control us. We marched to the Union Building. Our leaders had black dresses trimmed with yellow and blue. We sang many songs while waiting for Verwoerd.

Koloi ena, e ya nyanyatha

Koloi ena e ya nyanyatha

Fa a sa sute ya go thula

(This car is moving very fast. If you don't move out of the way, it will knock you down.)

Did he live long thereafter? He didn't. We waited for him outside but he never turned up. We received a message which said we should go home, Verwoerd would hold a meeting with us in a few days. All that they were telling us was lies. Immediately after all these strikes, most of us were forced to move from Alexandra and Sophiatown to Meadowlands, Orlando, Diepkloof and other townships. I think the aim of the government was to make us less militant.

Man Called Fish

Granny, who used to go around organising meetings in Alexandra? **Fish was the man who was very active. I think his name should have been written down in the books because he was very popular. We used to assemble at No.3 Square very early in the morning in response to a whistle. As early as 5 o'clock one would see men distributing pamphlets warning people not to go to work the following day because the strike would begin on that day. Men were getting paid £3 per week and they had to pay rent out of that. We therefore insisted on 'a pound a day' so that they could earn at least £5 per week. It became a well organised strike. No one dared to go to work while other people were on strike. We were one thing.**

Buses

Did you boycott buses also?

Yes, it happened that bus fares got increased from 4d to 5d if one wanted to go to town. Then we went on strike. We didn't even feel the distance from home to work in going on foot. The boycott lasted for six months. It went on like that until the fare got reduced to 4d, the original one.

Soft-spoken Man

The husband of the widow of Phokeng is a shadowy figure in her story. We do not hear of the part he played in the boycotts, strikes and campaigns that were so much a part of her life. Was he a political coward? When she is wrestling with the Msomi gangster, her husband plays the minor role. Was he a physical coward, too? Whenever she chooses to give us a glimpse of him, we see enough to know that it could not have been as simple as this. Whatever he did, or did not do, she continued to respect him.

'There was something I could not cook very well, thick porridge. What I would do was to boil water in the saucepan and wait for my husband to come home and ask him to mix it for me.'

From the beginning she accepted that 'I was married to a peace-loving

man. My husband was soft-spoken.' He was soft-spoken about his achievements, too. Before they were married, he didn't tell her that he was attending night-school. He learnt to read and write English. Later, he was able to help the children to read and to do their arithmetic.

'My husband was a religious man. Every day when supper was over, he would gather the family to the table, read the Scripture and explain to the children.'

His religion did not make him intolerant. She seems to have appreciated the latitude he left her to lead her own life. His easy-going temperament meant that their house was free of tension and bickering.

'My husband was very good. He used not to complain about small issues. I was even strict as compared to him.'

She recalls an incident early on in her fruit-selling days which showed her how conservative and hidebound many of the men from their region still were.

'One day when I was busy selling, one man I was acquainted with shouted at me and said, "Mma-Josefa, why do you stand there selling apples in the street when on the other hand Joseph is busy working to support you and the children?"' I felt so humiliated that I could not even answer to that.'

The attitude of her husband was very different:

'He only asked whether I would cope up with all the work. He thought it would be strenuous for me to go around selling. I convinced him that I was accompanied by a group of women who were also selling fruit. He didn't make a fuss of it.'

His Choice

Only one difference of opinion stood between them all their lives. They were agreed that money would be set aside and saved to build or purchase the house in which they would live when they were old. What they disagreed about was where the house would be.

'If only he could have agreed with me when I asked to buy a plot in Alexandra, he could have died rich. He argued that we could not buy a plot in Alexandra since our place of birth was Phokeng.'

This disagreement is not as clear-cut as it seems. Choosing Phokeng, her husband's reasons are traditional, conservative. Yet we have seen that he adapted well to city life. What he learned he passed on to his children. He supported his wife's experiments in getting by. Choosing Alexandra, she seems to have turned her back on country-based values; getting rich is important. Yet she says: 'My child, whites have taken our culture from us.' In the popular struggles of her Alexandra days she stands with the rank-and-file. Would things have been different if she had had her way, and invested in property?

(At the time of the squatter movements in Alexandra in the Forties, when the Bantu Tenants Association was started by Marks Rammitloa and Schreiner Baduza, there were property owners who locked their taps and charged for water. Rents were forced up. Thirty tenants had to share a single toilet.)

Through the years her husband worked for a shop-owner in Rosebank. By 1962 they were being threatened with removal to Meadowlands. Sufficient money had been saved for the house in Phokeng, so they decided to build it and move there.

'We had to move into this house during that year, but he was unfortunate to move in here dead.'

The husband died: it was the wife who lived out the future the husband had prepared; the future she had tried to oppose.

Tale of Two Sons

She is back in Phokeng, twenty years a widow now, when she tells this story. Of the five children she raised, three survive. Her eldest son was killed by thugs in Diepkloof. When he was a boy, and she and her husband were both working, he would buy the food and prepare it. When he was a man, he sent her money regularly. She still grieves for him. The manner of his death fills her with bitterness against the Golden City.

The son who survives is her youngest. His name is 'Lucky'. He lives in Soweto.

'My child, a black man is being used by whites. We are a source of income to them. Nowadays they have introduced a TV to us. I once visited my son in Johannesburg and I was amazed when I found out that every night his friends come from all angles to watch television. I started thinking about how cunning whites can be. They started off with a "wireless" and it earned them a lot of money, "kwadi" (an organ) was the next to follow, now it is this thing, TV set. Nowadays there is nothing constructive that we think of except going to so-and-so to watch television. My grandchildren from Soweto once visited me here in Phokeng. They would go watch television every afternoon and not bother themselves about helping with domestic work at home. I had to reprimand them but it was of no use since their father stood on their side. If I were a man, I wouldn't be worrying myself about buying a TV set. Nowadays we don't plough any longer, we have to spend on buying things at the shop. We don't work anymore but we have to depend on the shop.'

Retreat Song

Back in Phokeng this woman who had refused all her life to carry a pass finally took one out.

'One of the clerks at the magistrate's offices said to me: "Granny, are you applying for the first time? People here have long been applying for passes, where have you been?" Then I said to him: "Mayibuye Africa! I also took part in that struggle so that you could work as a clerk in the office like this one. I was not satisfied to see Boers only in the offices." '

Whenever she pays the 50c bus fare to Rustenburg she remembers the Alexandra bus boycotts.

'People say nothing about it. If it were during those years we would be boycotting them.'

She is back where she started. She fought and she was defeated. Yet as she looks at her life it seems to her that coming back to Phokeng may have been the best thing she could do. She has protected her independence. The house she lived in in Alexandra was pulled down to

make way for the women's hostel. Her brother's daughter stays there, and while visiting her she saw something that made a deep impression on her.

'I saw a very old woman walking past with a stick in her hand. I recognised her immediately and began to ask: "Is that woman so-and-so from Bethanie? She looks much older than I expected. Where does she stay? Why does she walk towards the hostel's entrance?" One woman then told me that the old woman was staying in that very hostel. Her children got married and left her. She sold all her belongings except her clothes and blankets which she brought along to the hostel. I looked at her with a broken heart and thanked myself for having gone to Phokeng to stay there while I was still having some means to build a house. I looked at her for a long time with sympathy. I felt a pain raging in my heart as though I had lost one of my children. I realised that she had no hope in life. She was a deserted woman.'

The widow of Phokeng has some fields at Bala, next to Chaneng village near Phokeng. There is a mine there, too, but the fields are at some distance from it. When the drought breaks, and school children can be found to assist, and a bargain can be struck with a man they know who has a tractor, she and another old woman plan to plough these fields and plant mabele.

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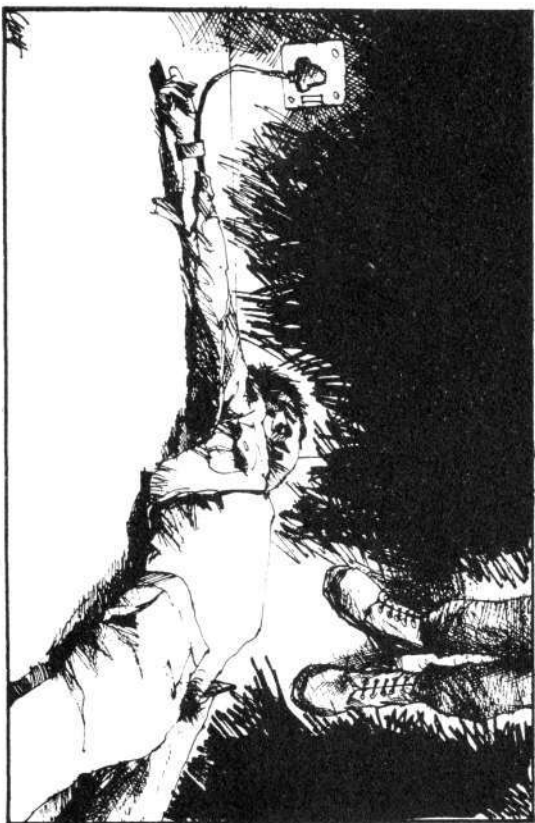
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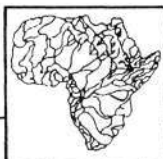
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Garth Erasmus



The Staffrider Series

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| 1. <i>Africa My Beginning</i> | Ingoapele Madingoane |
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| 3. <i>Forced Landing</i> | (ed) Mothobi Mutloatse |
| 4. <i>Ogun Abibiman</i> | Wole Soyinka |
| 5. <i>Mzala</i> | Mbulelo Mzamane |
| 7. <i>Waiting for Leila</i> | Achmat Dangor |
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